NAGARJUNA'S UNSURPASSED MEDICINE: EMPTINESS AND THE DOCTRINE OF UPAYA

by

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Nagarjuna is one of the few Buddhist thinkers that Western philosophers have begun to explore in detail and take seriously. Although primarily concerned with explaining Buddhist doctrine to the Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions of India, Nagarjuna's significance for Western philosophers lies in the fact that he is addressing the same types of issues that Western thinkers have struggled with for centuries. He is thus portrayed not simply as a South Asian Buddhist thinker, but as a philosopher who has something important to say about philosophical issues such as causality, metaphysics, the nature of thinking, epistemological realism, and the inherent limitations of language. In this sense, Nagarjuna is considered a philosopher with status, on the same level, if not higher, than Kant, Hume, Wittgenstein, and Derrida.

This thesis questions this portrayal of Nagarjuna by arguing that it relies on "theoretical" understanding of Buddhist doctrine. Western philosophers persistently view Nagarjuna as addressing "theoretical" problems, and assume that Buddhist liberation is contingent upon a correct "philosophical" understanding of the world, the

mind, and the nature of language. This is a "theoretical" approach to Buddhism because it says one needs to adopt a certain "philosophical" viewpoint in order to attain liberation. The irony in this, however, is that Nagarjuna is trying to "cure" this exact way of thinking. For him, to approach Buddhist liberation in "theoretical" or "philosophical" terms is misleading because it forces us to adopt a detached perspective far removed from those who the Buddhist teachings are supposed to help. For Nagarjuna, Buddhist teachings arise only within the context of trying to solve certain life problems, and to adopt a "theory" of Buddhism, therefore, or to think that liberation depends on a "philosophical" understanding of the world, is to lose sight of what those problems really are. Thus, to say Nagarjuna addresses larger "philosophical" issues is to practice what he warns against.

This thesis argues against a "philosophical" portrayal of Nagarjuna by examining the doctrine of "skillful means" which plays a distinctive role in Buddhist soteriology. The significance of "skillful means" is its rejection of a "theory of liberation" in favor of a contextual and multi-strategic approach to helping others. "Skillful means" begins with the assumption that there are concrete differences in people's lives, differences that cannot be resolved by appealing to philosophical principles. Because the doctrine of "skillful means" begins with such differences, it promotes innumerable soteriological "devices" and strategies for helping others. Thus, "emptiness," "dependent-arising," "impermanence," and *nirvana* are only a few of the many "skillful means" that Buddhists use to facilitate liberation, and Nagarjuna warns against turning such terms into "philosophical" problems. Operating within a "skillful means" tradition, Nagarjuna places Buddhist doctrine within a medicinal and heuristic context, and argues that its teachings are best understood within the soteriological practices of Buddhist life.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There is a famous story in the Buddhist Pali text, the *Mahavagga*, that will play an important role throughout this study. The story is about the historical Buddha who, immediately following his "Great Awakening," began to have serious doubts as to whether anyone would understand his teachings.[1] Arising from five weeks of deep contemplation at the foot of a Banyan tree near Bodhgaya, it suddenly occurred to the Buddha that his *dhamma*, which is "deep, difficult to see, difficult to understand, peaceful, excellent, beyond dialectic," could not be taught because the world was too "cloaked in the murk of ignorance" to accept his teachings in an undistorted way. His mind, the text tells us, "inclined to little effort, and not to teaching *dhamma*." Given the "habitual tendencies," the attachments, and the insatiable cravings of people, the Buddha sensed the impossibility of communicating his teachings in an effectual way. Thus, rather than treading "against the stream" by teaching views that would only confuse the world, the Buddha decided to remain silent, and to keep his *dhamma* hidden from others.

If the story stopped here then the Buddha's teachings may have never spread across the globe. But a certain god named Brahma suddenly appeared to the Buddha and urged him to teach. Descending from his "Brahma world," the god knelt at the Buddha's feet and pleaded, "Lord, let the Lord teach *dhamma*, let the Well-farer teach *dhamma*; there are beings with little dust in their eyes who, not hearing *dhamma* are decaying, but if they are learners of *dhamma*, they will grow."[2] Brahma repeated his plea three times, and as the Buddha listened he began to look at the world in a fresh light. His newly attained "Buddha eye" gifted him with an enlightened vision of sentient beings, a vision

that was so simple and yet so profound that it completely changed his mind about whether to preach the *dhamma*.

> As the Lord was surveying the world with the eye of an awakened one, he saw beings with little dust in their eyes, with much dust in their eyes, with acute faculties, with dull faculties, of good dispositions, of bad dispositions, docile, indocile, few seeing fear in sins and the worlds beyond.[3]

In both the *Mahavagga* and *Majjhima-Nikaya*, the Buddha's vision of sentient beings is compared to a lotus pond with different colored flowers and different degrees of growth.

> Even as in a pond of blue lotuses or in a pond of red lotuses or in pond of white lotuses, a few blue or red or white lotuses are born in the water, grow in the water, do not rise above the water but thrive while altogether immersed; a few blue or red or white lotuses are born in the water, grow in the water and reach the surface of the water; a few blue or red or white lotuses are born in the water, grow in the water, and stand up rising out of the water, undefiled by the water.[4]

Looking at the world through his "Buddha eyes," Gotama Buddha perceived the different psycho-physical dispositions of individuals, and saw how all beings are colored by events which effect their lives in distinct ways. Just as there are many types of lotuses, so there are many types of human beings, each with different degrees of "dust" in their eyes. Upon seeing such contextual differences the Buddha realized something very important: that if he is to teach *dhamma* it must be geared to the different needs and dispositions of his audience. With this new understanding the Buddha rose up and decided to preach after all. His first sermon, the "Turning of the Wheel of *Dhamma*," was given to the five ascetics whom he spent years with meditating in the hills.

There is an interesting hermeneutic problem that arises from this story. Because the Buddha does not begin teaching until after his decision to gear his words to the

different karmic dispositions of individuals, it is not clear how we are supposed to interpret his views. His compassionate desire to help others--to "cure" the ills of the world--is connected to the insight that he must speak directly to the different levels of his audience; and it is this connection that throws an interpretive dilemma over everything he teaches. For although the Buddha's desire to help others is sincere--otherwise his "vexation" over not being understood would never have arisen--it is not clear whether anything he says after his decision to teach can be interpreted in a "truthful" manner. His first teaching to the five ascetics, for example, describes the Four Noble Truths of existence, that all life is *duhkha* (suffering), that *duhkha* arises due to attachments, and that there is both a cure (*nirvana*) and a path leading to cessation of *duhkha*; and his second sermon describes what seems like a definite ontological view of the world: that all things lack substance (*anatman*), are impermanent (*anicca*), and dependently arisen (*pratitya-samutpada*). The two sermons comprise everything we might consider philosophically interesting in the Buddha's teachings, and yet since both are given only *after* his decision to employ certain methodological strategies that best fit the dispositions of his audience, it is questionable whether we can read these teachings as describing an ontological "truth." Thus, when the Buddha speaks of *nirvana*, or when he says that all life is *dukhka*, without substance, and impermanent, we must question whether these teachings describe the actual content of his enlightenment experience--and hence tell us what the Buddha's real philosophical position was--or whether such views are nothing more than pedagogical "devices" which he promised to express for the benefit of others.

The history of Buddhist thought has not allowed this hermeneutic puzzle to go unnoticed. Beginning around the 1st century CE, the Mahayana tradition developed in response to the early scholastic form of Buddhism that interpreted the Buddha's teachings in propositional terms: i.e., as signifying ontological and metaphysical truths. Against

this tradition, the Mahayana thinkers declared that all the Buddha's teachings are none other than "skillful means" which the Buddha used to help suffering creatures. While the scholastic Buddhists tried to discover the "truth" behind such words as "dependent arising," "non-self," and "*nirvana*," the Mahayana thinkers centered their attention on the exact moment in which the Buddha decided to use whatever teachings were necessary to help sentient beings. According to the Mahayana, all of the Buddha's teachings, including the ideas of dependent arising, non-self, and *nirvana*, are nothing more than heuristic, soteriological, or skillful devices stemming from the "Great Compassion" of the Buddha.

The problem of how to interpret the Buddha's teachings arises in Western Buddhist scholarship as well, though in different ways. For those who approach Buddhism from a philosophical perspective, Buddhism tends to get promoted as a set of "philosophical" doctrines about the structure of the universe, the nature of consciousness, or the limits of language. In a way similar to the scholastic Buddhists, Western philosophers see the ideas of non-self, *nirvana*, emptiness, dependent arising, and other key Buddhist terms as signifying something "truthful" about existence. This is evident by looking at the major debates among Buddhist philosophers such as, for example, whether *nirvana* is a mystical state that transcends the categories of speech, or whether it is empirically grounded with no reference to a metaphysical realm; whether the doctrine of *anatman* points to a deeper state of consciousness, a true "Self" similar to the Vedantin *atman*, or whether it rejects any and all forms of "self"; and finally, there is the debate as to whether the term "emptiness" signifies the ontological interconnectedness of the universe, as some Buddhist philosophers propose, or whether it is the complete "deconstruction" of "truth," the letting go of all attempts to find anything "essential" in the world.

Such debates tell us something about how the Buddha's teachings are being interpreted. Although there are sharp disagreements over the nature of Buddhist philosophy, and although philosophers offer opposing metaphysical, epistemological, and ontological doctrines regarding the Buddha's teachings, there is a common assumption that liberation, the end-goal of all Buddhist practice, is something to be achieved only by adopting a certain philosophical position.

It is this "philosophical" way of interpreting Buddhism that this thesis will address. I want to take the insight from the Mahayana tradition in which all of the Buddha's teachings are seen as *upayas* and show how much of the debate among Western Buddhist philosophers is misleading. The insight from the Mahayanists is that the idea of *upaya* cannot be dissociated from any of the key terms that the Buddha used, since all teachings are directed toward the particular life problems of certain individuals, and expressed only in the context of helping others. What can be read as "philosophically" true statements regarding the nature of existence, the self, and ultimate reality, are really only "skillful means" used to facilitate spiritual growth. When the Buddha referred to his teachings as "rafts," we will see, he was reminding his followers that what he says has value only in relation to helping others, and should be discarded after one has reached the other "shore."

The most significant Mahayana Buddhist, Nagarjuna, also takes this view to heart when he cautions those who seek to interpret *sunyata*, or "emptiness" as a philosophical description about the nature of reality. Even emptiness, he says, is "empty," indicating its practical role within a soteriological framework, and not a theory, doctrine, or philosophical view to which one should become attached. To take *sunyata* in any other way, he warns, is to miss the entire point of Buddhism.

> The victorious ones have said
> That emptiness is the relinquishing of all views.
> For whomever emptiness is a view,
> That one will accomplish nothing.[5]

Michael Pye is one of the few Western thinkers on Buddhism to adopt this Mahayana insight regarding *upaya*. In his book, *Skilful Means*, he traces the idea of *upaya* from early Buddhism through the Mahayana sutras, and notes how such a pivotal concept in Buddhism has been generally overlooked. As he says,

> It is fair to say that the method of thought and practice summed up by the concept of skilful means is one of the fundamental principles of Buddhism. And yet, strangely enough the matter has never been the subject of extended study...'Nirvana', 'bodhisattva', 'emptiness', and so on have all been considered in this way and that, but apart from occasional references and brief definitions 'skilful means' has scarcely been attended to at all. A concept which has been used to explain the very existence of Buddhism as a functioning religious system demands closer attention"[6]

Pye's examination of *upaya* is primarily a textual analysis of "skilful means" in the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Perfection of Insight* literature, and, while offering some suggestive comments about the philosophical and hermeneutic implications of *upaya*, his book is primarily exegetical. Beginning with early Buddhist literature, Pye limits his discussion to enumerating the many occurrences of "skilful means" in the Mahayana texts, and then traces the use of *upaya* through Japanese sources. The Madhyamika school, which is perhaps the most philosophically rigorous tradition in Buddhism, is scarcely examined, and the massive commentarial literature that surrounds Buddhist philosophy is rarely mentioned. Although Pye's book is helpful for understanding the pervasive use of the term "skilful means" in Buddhist literature, it offers little in the way of a critical approach to Buddhist philosophy.

The purpose of what follows is to examine the idea of "skilful means" in relation to how Buddhist thought is portrayed mainly by Western philosophers. Whereas Pye's work is limited to an exegesis of Buddhist literature, my aim is critical. I want to show how much of the debate surrounding Buddhist philosophy is misleading in that it fails to take into account the doctrine of *upaya*. What is missing in the "philosophical" discussions of Buddhism is an analysis that would make sense of Buddhist thought in relation to the contextual needs and dispositions of an audience; i.e., Buddhism is often promoted as a "theory," with a certain world view, metaphysic, and epistemology, and as something that can be understood in separation from its practical and soteriological role in helping others. This way of understanding Buddhism is misguided, I will argue, not simply because it loses sight of the notion of *upaya*, but because of the more serious problem of neglecting the pedagogical context in which Buddhist teachings find their home.

The thesis is divided into six sections. Chapter one begins by examining the role of *upaya* in the teachings of the historical Buddha, and relies on a common metaphor in which the Buddha refers to his teachings as "rafts" to be used for helping sentient beings cross the turbulent "stream" of *samsara*, or suffering. The metaphor of the "raft" is important because it dissolves our ability to read the Buddha's teachings as ontological or metaphysical "truths"--they are heuristic tools, strategies, and provisional devices used within a specific soteriological context, and not neutral descriptions about the nature of the universe. As we will see, the Buddha's advice to view his teachings as "rafts" is diametrically opposed to a "theoretical" conception of Buddhism since it tells us that no single philosophical theory, view, or religious doctrine is sufficient to "cure" the different types of "diseases" that individuals suffer from.

Chapter two focuses on the Abhidharma tradition in Buddhism, and examines the development of a "theoretical" approach to Buddhist philosophy. Whereas the Buddha likened his teachings to "rafts," the Abhidharma Buddhists attempted to discover the "truth" behind what the Buddha said. Thus, rather than taking the ideas of "non-self," "dependent arising," and "nirvana" as different soteriological strategies (skilful means) used within a particular context to help cure a specific "illness," the Abhidharma tradition interpreted them propositionally, as describing an underlying "truth" to existence, and hence developed a rich and complex philosophical vocabulary for justifying the Buddha's teachings in a rational way. The most obvious example is their analysis of causality, which, as we will see, is an attempt to establish the "truth" of "non-self" by describing the impermanent nature of dependently originated phenomena (*dharmas*). One of the most significant features of the Abhidharma tradition is its departure from the idea of "skilful means" by asserting that liberation is contingent upon a metaphysical understanding of the world.

Chapter three is an introduction to the Mahayana tradition through *The Holy Teachings of Vimalakirti*. This is a good text to focus on because it prefigures many of the key teachings which are found later in Nagarjuna, as well as presenting a direct attack on a certain way of interpreting Buddhist teachings. In the *Vimalakirti*, we discover key Mahayana ideas such as "emptiness," compassion, the *bodhisattva* ideal, and the doctrine of "two truths," all of which play a crucial role in Nagarjuna's thought. The way the *Vimalakirti* asks us to view these teachings, however, is interesting. Instead of telling us that these doctrines refer to some underlying "truth" about the nature of reality, it says that they are narrative tales told to a specific audience for the purpose of helping this audience. The main figure in the text, a layman called Vimalakirti, attacks those who preach Buddhism as a "theory," i.e., those who take Buddhist doctrine as describing

some metaphysical truth about the world and who think that the soteriological function of Buddhism consists in preaching such "truths" independent of knowing whom one is trying to help. Vimalakirti attacks this approach as causing more harm than good, and reminds us that Buddhist teachings are narrative stories or strategic devices (*upayas*) that arise only in the context of curing certain "illnesses." To preach Buddhist doctrine without knowing the specific "illness" an audience has, Vimalakriti says, will only make matters worse.

Taking this insight from the Vimalakirti, I then proceed in chapters four and five to examine the body of scholarship surrounding the greatest Mahahyana philosopher, Nagarjuna. Chapter four outlines the major scholarly interpretations regarding Nagarjuna, and is divided into three separate positions: the nihilist, the mystic, and the conventionalist. Although some brief criticisms of these positions are offered toward the end of this section, the fifth chapter is devoted exclusively to highlighting the common weakness in these positions. Relying on the Buddha's metaphor of "rafts" as well as Vimalakirti's advice to view Buddhist doctrine in a narrative way, I try to show in chapter five how the major interpretations of Nagarjuna mistake his use of "emptiness," his doctrine of the "two truths," and his dialectical critique of "inherent nature" as having general philosophical significance. The problem with this, as we will see, is that it treats Nagarjuna's thought in a highly abstract way, as something that can be understood independent of its rhetorical context and as a set of "theoretical" views that have meaning apart from their soteriological context. Most scholars agree that Nagarjuna's use of "emptiness," for example, is a curative device, but what they see it curing has to do with problems surrounding metaphysics, language, epistemology, and logic. The irony in this is that Nagarjuna struggling against this of viewing Buddhism because he sees it as bad

"medicine": i.e., it forces one to think of Buddhism as a set of philosophical views which can be expressed without knowing anything about the type of "illness" one seeks to cure.

The final chapter gives a reading of some key sections from Nagarjuna's *Madhyamikakarika*, with special attention paid to the rhetorical context of his assertions. The main point of this chapter is to bring out the types of views Nagarjuna is criticizing, and to show who he is attacking. It should become clear by this point that his main target has to do with those traditions, such as the Abhidharma Buddhists, who construct what I call "theories of liberation." A theory of liberation assumes that in order to overcome suffering one must first attain some sort of philosophical knowledge about the nature of the world, causality, language, the mind, consciousness, and so forth. It assumes that everyone suffers from the same problem, and that if we could gain knowledge of this problem then we would all achieve liberation. Like the Buddha and Vimalakirti, however, Nagarjuna argues against a "theory of liberation" because it is backward: it thinks that helping others entails knowing something deeper and more mysterious than the particular problems individuals face in their daily lives, and as a result it abstracts itself from the concrete differences of individuals by searching for a single cause. Assuming to know in advance what the cause of suffering is, and how to be liberated from it, a "theory of liberation" resembles the sanitary practices of a physician who never consults his patients because he thinks everyone suffers from the same disease.

It is sometimes said that Buddhism is more of a therapy than a philosophy, and that it is more concerned with spiritual practices and meditative techniques than it is with speculating over purely philosophical issues.[7] This thesis supports that position by arguing against those who construct a "philosophy" out of Buddhism. It tries to show how Buddhism is easily misunderstood when abstracted from the spiritual practices

which give it life and turned into a philosophical "theory" about the nature of reality, the mind, consciousness, or causation.

Buddhist practice is non-philosophical to the extent that it shuns a "theoretical" conception of human beings and their problems; its primary goal is to help others overcome suffering and pain, and to facilitate a type of spiritual growth that leads to happiness, peace, mindfulness, and non-attachment: i.e., *nirvana*. This form of therapy does not need a "theory" about the nature of the world or suffering because it believes that helping others means being sensitive to the karmic dispositions of individuals and being grounded in their lives. To see through "the eyes of the Buddha" is not to behold a theory about the nature of reality, but to see, to hear, and to feel the concrete suffering of sentient beings. This, as the Mahayana Buddhists call it, is the path of a bodhisattva.

The notion of "skilful means" is crucial to that part of Buddhism which is devoted to helping others attain liberation. Generally speaking, "skilful means" is the methodological means for attaining enlightenment, *nirvana*, non-self, and non-attachment. Nevertheless, the reader will find no hints in the following study regarding the "end-goal" of Buddhism. For those wanting to understand the nature of *nirvana* , non-attachment, or enlightenment, this thesis will offer no clues. This will no doubt sound unfair to many readers (especially those trained in philosophy) since the entire thesis surrounds the idea of "skilful means"--and it might seem natural ask, "What are all these skilful means in Buddhism a means *to*?" But, as we will see, it is just this type of question that the idea of *upaya* wants to critique.

In fact, all the thinkers I criticize in the thesis are trying to answer this question by giving us the end-goal of Buddhism. Enlightenment, they say, has to do with releasing ourselves from the grip of grammatical fabrications, from logic, metaphysics, reason, conceptual dualities, and essentialism, and their texts are generally devoted to showing us

how Buddhism is a means to deconstruct a fallacious view of personal identity, of the world, and of language, so that we can adopt a more "truthful" view of things. Thus, the end goal of Buddhism, according to their accounts, has to do with getting a clearer perception of the world, of language, metaphysics, causality, the nature of thinking, and so forth.

But it is precisely this attempt to define the "end" that the idea of *upaya* resists. Buddhist practice, according to the doctrine of *upaya*, is the practice of helping others, and to define the "end" in advance is bad practice because it forces us to adopt a standpoint outside the contextual needs and dispositions of those we want to help. Defining the "end," the Buddha might say, "tends not to edification" because it demands a set goal, a "theory" and a "map" before ever confronting those who suffer.

NOTES

[1]*Mahavagga, I*, I.B. Horner, trans., *Book of Disciplines*, (Luzac &Co. 1962), p.6-8. The same story can also be found in *Majjhima Nikaya*, I. B. Horner, trans., *The Middle Length Sayings I*, (Luzac &Co. 1967), p. 210.

[2] Ibid., p. 9.

[3] Ibid., p. 9.

[4] Ibid., p. 9.

[5] Nagarjuna, *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, Jay L. Garfield, trans., *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 36.

[6] Michael Pye, *Skilful Means: A Concept in Mahayana Buddhism*, (Duckworth, 1978), p. 1.

[7] This point is made clear by Robert Buswell when he says the following: "Consider the recurrence throughout the tradition of the motif of the Buddha as 'physician' or therapist rather than theorist. This imagery is more than accidentally congruous with Buddhism's repeated assassin of the superiority of analytical and critical thought over synthetic or constructive speculation. Hence the Buddha is said to have identified himself as 'analyzer' rather than as a 'dogmatist' or someone who makes categorical assertions. This reasoning seems also to justify the characteristically Buddhist invocation of pragmatic criteria for the evaluation of doctrines and practices...It is not unexpected, therefore, that Buddhists should regularly choose disciplined experience (e.g., meditation) over reason, revelation, and authority as the final arbiter of religious truth or efficacy. All these things and more, we would suggest, flow from the primacy of marga and soteriology among all the components of Buddhism," from the introduction to *Paths to Liberation*, edited by Robert Buswell Jr. and Robert Gimello, (Kuroda Institue, 1992), p. 4.

CHAPTER II

THROUGH THE EYES OF THE BUDDHA

Introduction

In this section I will examine the teachings of the historical Buddha. I will spend little time explaining the philosophical significance of the Buddha's teachings, however, and even less time on the logical coherence of such key Buddhist terms as "non-self," "dependent arising," the "Four Noble Truths" and "impermanence." Rather, the emphasis will be on the pedagogical style of the Buddha--on *how* he teaches. This is a crucial element in Buddhism because it tells us something significant about who the Buddha's audience was about how he communicated his ideas. If we neglect these aspects, we run the risk of discussing Buddhism in purely "philosophical" terms --as a set of doctrines that have conceptual validity apart from their pedagogical and rhetorical context. Though such a discussion could yield fascinating insights, it is the purpose of this chapter to show how it would lead us away from the strictly soteriological dimension of the Buddha's thought. In fact, this chapter will try to show how the Buddha's teaching style is directly linked to the practice of liberation.

The scholastic tradition in Buddhism which we will examine in Chapter III neglected the Buddha's pedagogical style by searching for an underlying "truth" to which his teachings supposedly pointed. Elements that were vital to the Buddha's pedagogical approach, such as narrative tales, anecdotes, metaphors and simile, were considered soteriologically insignificant in relation to a purely logical analysis of phenomena. Thus, while helpful for the unintelligent, the Buddha's style had little in

common with a "higher"--more "philosophical"--discourse that leads to liberation. As we will see in this section, there is a prevalent tradition in Western scholarship that accepts the idea and assumes that liberation depends on knowing certain "truths"--that there is no "self," for example, or that everything is dependently arisen and impermanent.

We will oppose this way of framing the Buddha's teachings by focusing on what the later Mahayana Buddhists call "skilful means." The significance of "skilful means" is its rejection of "truth" in favor of pluralistic and mutli-strategic approach to liberation. The Buddha's insight while looking at the world through the eyes of an "Awakened One" was that the practice of liberation--the practice of helping others--depends on being attentive to the needs and dispositions of those who suffer. He saw sentient beings suffering in different ways (with different degrees of "dust" in their eyes), and understood that no single theory or "truth" will suffice. Rather, a vast range of pedagogical styles and skills will be needed to address the many different types of problems in life. That the Buddha does in fact teach a variety of views, even contradictory ones, will tell us that the Buddha's practice of liberation is unconcerned with the "truth" of such views.

This section is not meant to serve as an in-depth analysis of the historical Buddha. Our purpose, rather, is to introduce the idea that the Buddha's teachings are "provisional" devices that arise in the context of trying to help certain individuals. This will then help us understand both how the latter scholastic tradition rejected this idea (Chapter III), and how Nagarjuna's tries to recuperate it (Chapter VII).

The Buddha's Skilful Means

Even though it was the Mahayana who popularized the notion that all the Buddha's teachings are none other than "skill-in-means" (*upaya-kausula*), the idea has clear roots in the early Pali texts. The most obvious example is found in section from the *Majjhima-nikaya* called "Crossing over by Raft." In this parable, the Buddha clearly states that his teachings are provisional guides that allow one to move from one place to another, and should be discarded after they have fulfilled their function.

> Monks, I will teach you Dhamma--the Parable of the Raft--for crossing over, not for retaining. Listen to it, attend carefully, and I will speak. A man going along a high-road might see a great stretch of water, the hither bank frightening. But if there were no boat for crossing by or a bridge across for going from the not-beyond to the beyond, he might think: 'If I were to collect sticks, grass, branches foliage and to tie a raft, then, depending on the raft and striving with my hands and feet, I might cross over safely to the beyond.' If he carried out his purpose, then, crossed over, gone beyond, it might occur to him: 'Now, this raft has been very useful to me. Depending on it and striving with my hands and feet, I have crossed over safely to the beyond. Suppose now, having put this raft on my head or lifted it on to my shoulder, I should proceed as I desire? ' Now, monks, in doing this is that man doing what should be done with that raft?[1]

As the Buddha explains in this passage, the *dhamma* is a "raft," and since the *dhamma* includes such doctrines as *nirvana*, dependent arising, non-self (*anatman*), impermanence and "emptiness," then they too are nothing more than provisional devices used for the specific purpose of helping individuals. As "rafts," it would be absurd to think of them in propositional terms, or as applying to all situations and contexts. To think of them in this way is to accept the *dhamma* as more than a "raft," as something that should be carried along after having reached the other "shore."

The Mahayana extends the "raft" metaphor to include the idea that the Buddha's teachings are "medicines"--and that it is therefore poor medicinal practice to utilize the

dhamma in a purely theoretical way. In chapter IV, for example, we will see how the *Vimalakirti-nirdesha* argues against treating the Buddha's teachings as "truths" which apply to all sentient beings. Such practice is "bad medicine" because it assumes everyone suffers from the same problem and that everyone can be cured with the same anecdote. Thus, the idea that one needs an account of the "human condition," of suffering, bondage, causality, the nature of consciousness and so forth is akin to toting the "raft" after having reached the other shore. As the *Vimalakirti* sutra will tell us, such practice leads us away from compassionate activity because it blocks our ability to see the concrete problems of individuals..

The Buddha's initial hesitation to teach was countered with this type of response. That is, he resisted teaching universally because he realized that individuals are as manifold as different colored lotuses, and that a set remedy--a single "raft"--would mean teaching *dhamma* in a "non-medicinal" way. The Buddha makes a similar point in the following passage where he argues against those who preach Buddhist doctrine as empty "truths."

> Herein, monks, some foolish men master *dhamma*; the discourses in prose, in prose and verse, the expositions, the verses, the uplifting verses, the "As it was saids," the Birth stories, the wonders, the Miscellanies. These, having mastered that *dhamma*, do not test the meaning of these things by intuitive wisdom; and these things whose meaning is untested by intuitive wisdom do not become clear; they master this *dhamma* simply for the advantage of reproaching others and for the advantage of gossiping, they do not arrive at that goal for the sake of which they mastered *dhamma*. These things, badly grasped by them conduce to their woe and sorrow for a long time. What is the reason for this? Monks, it is because of a wrong grasp of things. Monks, it is like a man walking about aiming after a water-snake, searching for a water-snake, looking for a water-snake. He might see a large water-snake, and he might take hold of it by a coil or by its tail; the water-snake having turned on him, might bite him on his hand or arm or on another part of his body; as a result he might come to dying or to pain like unto dying.[2]

The Buddha's anger in this passage is directed against those who learn *dhamma* in a mechanical way, and who think it can be taught by reciting formulas and principles.

Their "grasp of things," says the Buddha, is wrong, and what they fail to grasp, as we will see in the *Vimalakrit-nirdesa*, is the embodied suffering of human beings. This type of "medicine" is counterproductive, and does more harm than good. Nagarjuna repeats the Buddha's warning almost word for word when he speaks of the doctrine of "emptiness."

> A wrongly conceived *sunyata* (emptiness) can ruin a slow-witted person. It is like a badly seized snake or a wrongly executed incantation.[3]

Although most scholars agree that the Buddha's teachings are provisional devices, there is a popular way of reading the "raft" metaphor which sees it as a "means" leading to "Truth." What this generally means is that liberation depends on knowing something about the nature of existence: that ultimate reality transcends the "dualities" of language and conceptualization, for example, or that the world is necessarily impermanent, interdependent, and "selfless." Seen this way, the Buddha's teachings are considered a means to a preestablished goal--a goal that is already known in advance.

Perhaps the most popular way of explaining this is to see the Buddha's teachings as a "means" for an ineffable and mystical experience. A famous proponent of this view, T. R. V. Murti, expresses this point in the following way:

> The rejection of theories (*ditthi*) is itself the *means* by which Buddha is led to the non-conceptual knowledge of the absolute, and not vice versa. It is no accident then that Buddha concerns himself with an analysis of the various theories of reality and rejects them all. Buddha ascends from the conflict of Reason to the inexpressibility of the absolute."[4]

Like Murti, many writers on Buddhism interpret the Buddha's teachings as views that transcend all theoretical and linguistic constructs. In Gadjin Nagao's thought, for instance, the Buddha taught the following:

> Ultimate Truth is beyond the reach of verbal designation (*prapanca*) or thought-construct (*vikalpa*). The ineffability and inconceivability of the Truth are descriptions frequently encountered in the (Buddhist) texts. The word is, as it were, merely a finger pointing at the moon. Just as a person would not see the moon by concentrating on the finger, he would miss Truth completely if he is engrossed in the word. No matter how minutely the word is analyzed, it will not bring about a confrontation with the Truth.[5]

According to David Loy, another proponent of this view, the core feature of the Buddhist "middle path" is that it "deconstructs" our everyday, linguistic experience to allow for a non-causal and non-conceptual.[6] The famous Buddhist scholar Edward Conze seems to agree with this view when he says about *sunyata*, "Here it must suffice to say that 'emptiness' means an absolute transcendental reality beyond the grasp of intellectual comprehension and verbal expression."[7]

Although each of the above thinkers comes from different Mahayana perspectives, they share a common vision of the Buddha teaching an ultimate truth beyond language, causality, and conceptualization. For these thinkers, liberation depends on overcoming such obstacles, and they already seem to know in advance what the end of Buddhism is, and how to get there.

David Kalupahana proposes a different view of the Buddha as a type of "empiricist." For him, the Buddha rejected all metaphysical views and denied anything which cannot be verified by sense experience. If sentient beings would simply confine themselves "to what is given, that is, to the causal dependence of phenomena, without searching for something mysterious," he says, their problems would be solved.[8] To see things "empirically" is to see the process of "dependent arising" in which phenomena rise and cease upon causes and conditions, and is, according to Kalupahana, the Buddha's truth: "It is, indeed, the truth about the world which the Buddha claimed he discovered and which became the 'central' doctrine of Buddhism."[9]

Although Kalupahana points in a radically different direction from thinkers like Murti, Loy, and Nagao, he shares the assumption that "truth" is a necessary condition for liberation, and that the Buddha prescribed a set remedy--a single "raft"--to attain it.

There are obviously many more views regarding the Buddha's teachings than these, ranging from a Wittgensteinian, Kantian, Humean, Pragmatist, and even Deconstructionist reading. This is not the place to go into detail about such readings, except to say that when the Buddha's teachings are framed in theoretical and philosophical terms we gloss over one of the most vital elements: his *style* of teaching. When the issues are framed in terms of ultimate truth, metaphysics, language, empirical observation, and cognition, we no longer see the Buddha as a creative "raft-maker whose tools are directed to a specific audience, but as a theoretician who contemplates the problems of individuals from a lofty perspective.

This depiction of the Buddha as "theoretician" can be avoided if we place his teachings in their pedagogical and rhetorical context. The "Fire Sermon" which the Buddha delivered to a group of Brahmanical fire-worshipping ascetics serves as a good example here because we can see him addressing an audience with words and images directly related to their "extreme" practices. Given that these devotees of the god of fire (*Agni)* engage in severe self-mortification by burning their flesh, the Buddha's way of communicating is to the point.

> All things, O priests, are on fire. And what, O priests, are these things which are on fire?
> The eye, O priests, is on fire; forms are on fire; eye-consciousness is on fire; impressions received by the eye are on fire; and whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent, originates in dependence on impression received by the eye, that also is on fire.
> And with what are these on fire?
> With the fire of passion, say I, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of infatuation; with birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair are they on fire.
> The ear is on fire;...the tongue is on fire; tastes are on fire;...the body is on fire; things tangible are on fire;...the mind is on fire; ideas are on fire;...mind-

> consciousness is on fire; impressions received by the mind are on fire; and whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent, originates in dependence on impressions received by the mind, that also is on fire.[10]

One way to read this passage is to say that the Buddha is saying something either about the nature of the world (i.e., that it is full of misery and hell-like) or about the nature of perception (i.e., that as long as there is "contact" between a sense organ and its object, there will be pain, unpleasantness, and grief). However, an ontological reading of this passage would be misleading because this teaching is directed toward a specific group of ascetics whose disciplines include self-immolation. Rather than saying anything philosophically significant, the Buddha is acting as a "physician" by trying to help others from harm themselves. In fact, it was because of this teaching, as the sutta tells us, that the Buddha was able to convert, Uruvela Kasapa, the chief fire-worshipper, and his thousand followers, all of whom ended their ascetic practices upon hearing the "Fire Sermon." [11]

Another example of the Buddha's teachings method is the First Sermon which was addressed to the five men whom he practiced austerities with. Like the "fire worshippers," the Buddha considered their practices extreme as well, and in the following passage from the *Dhammapada* he speaks directly to their assumptions regarding the misery of existence.

> How is there laughter, how is there joy, as this world is always burning? Do you not seek a light, you who are surrounded by darkness?
> Look at this dressed-up lump, covered with wounds, joined together sickly, full of many schemes, but which has no strength, no hold!
> This body is wasted, full of sickness, and frail; this heap of corruption breaks to pieces, life indeed ends in death.[12]

The universality of *duhkha* is expressed in the Buddha's First Sermon, and is considered one of the "three marks" of existence. Yet, an ontological interpretation of

this teaching is doubtful if we keep in mind his pedagogical context. Even though he characterizes (or "marks") the world as *duhkha*, he explains that there is nevertheless an escape from suffering, but an escape that cannot be realized while practicing extreme self-mortification. "By suffering," says the Buddha, "the emaciated devotee produces confusion and sickly thoughts in his mind. Mortification is not conducive even to worldly knowledge."[13] The teaching he gives this specific group--the "Noble Eightfold Path"--is one which tries to avoid the extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortificaton.

If we read the above sermon as a "truth" which the Buddha recommended for all, we should be forced to characterize Buddhism as a highly pessimistic religion (which is how it was first received by Western scholars). But to reduce Buddhism to this is the direct result of overlooking the *upayic* significance of such teachings, i.e., it means taking what the Buddha says in these passages as more than "rafts," more than soteriological guides used within a specific context and with a particular group in mind. It also leaves us wondering how to interpret such passages like the following where the Buddha teaches about universal love:

May creatures all abound
in weal and peace; may all
be blessed with peace always;
all creatures weak or strong,
all creatures great and small.

Just as with her own life
a mother shields from hurt
her own, her only, child,--
let all-embracing thoughts
for all that lives be thine,

--an all-embracing love
for all the universe
in all its heights and depths
and breadth, unstinted love,
unmarred by hate within,
not rousing enmity.

So, as you stand or walk,

or sit, or lie, reflect
with all your might on this;
–'tis deemed 'a state divine.'[14]

Whether the Buddha would teach such views about universal love to his ascetic companions is doubtful. Their problem is not a lack of love--but a desire to realize the "Self" by strict methods of self-mortification. Thus, even though the Buddha agrees with his acetic companions that life is *duhkha*, he disagrees that this is something that can be overcome by searching for a "Self." It is only when we take such teachings from their rhetorical context that we could even begin to see them as propositions referring to an underlying "truth."

That the Buddha's teachings are "skilful means" should caution us against thinking in this way, however. The *dhamma*, as he says, is for "crossing over, not for retaining," meaning that its nature as a "raft" should not be mistaken for something else. Hence, when we examine certain "truths" within his discourses, we must be careful not to abstract the content of his teachings from their soteriological context. Otherwise, we mistake a simple methodological device for a philosophical "theory."

The early Mahayana sutras express this point by emphasizing the "innumerable devices" the Buddha uses to help sentient beings. Depending on the relative intellectual and spiritual level of a particular person, the Buddha adopts the best strategy to "cure" the "disease." The *Lotus Sutra*, for example, tells the story of a father who saves his children from burning in a house. The children are unaware of the fire, and so the father resorts to "skilful means" by offering them gifts; and brings the children rushing from the house.[15]

Patronizing as this story is, the general idea is that the Buddha's teachings are "skilful means," and whatever philosophical view he may have is irrelevant to the situation.

The Mahayana sutras are full of such stories, expressing the idea that the Buddha's undying compassion overrides all other concerns, be they philosophical, doctrinal, or ethical. The *Upayakausalya Sutra*, for instance, tells how the Buddha had sex with young a woman who threatened to die for love of him. This was during one of his previous lives in which he had vowed to live a celibate life, and yet the Buddha broke his monastic code out of compassion for the young woman.[16]

Another story from the same text tells how the Buddha in a former life actually murdered a man. His reason was to prevent the man from killing 500 others, and the only way to prevent it was to kill him. The Buddha's act was motivated solely from compassion, both for those who were about to be murdered as well as for the murderer: and the Buddha was willing to act against morality and suffer in hell because of it.[17]

Such stories encourage us to resist thinking about Buddhism in philosophical terms: the teachings are practical, and are supposed to function like temporary "rafts" that should discarded after their use. The following remark by Wittgenstein expresses a similar point.

> My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them--as steps--to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)[18]

Although Wittgenstein's Logical Atomism is not a view the Buddha would subscribe to, the metaphor of an abandoned ladder fits the Buddha's teachings as "rafts." To assume that the Buddha's philosophy is for discovering "correct" ontological and epistemological principles misses this point. What he said was directed with an ear to his listeners: he was aware of their position in life, their emotional and psychological make-up, and the views they accepted as true. This allowed him to carefully choose

those words and ideas that would have the greatest impact on his listeners. As Walpola Rahula notes,

> He always spoke to people bearing in mind their standard of development. their tendencies, their mental make-up, their character, their capacity to understand a particular question.[19]

Developing the "right" theory was irrelevant to the Buddha, whose main task was to relieve suffering, which does not require being limited to any single conception of truth. On the contrary, it requires openness, philosophical agility, and the ability to use any number of "strategic devices."

The Teaching of Non-Self

Turning Buddhist teachings into "theories" is often done with the doctrine of *anatman* ("non-self") which the Buddha outlined in his Second Sermon. According to this teaching, there is no substantial, isolated, independent, or eternal "self." All phenomena flow like Heraclitus' great river, no part of it fixed or stagnant, and every element an interconnected and dependent part. "All *dhammas*," as it says in the *Dhammapada*, "are without self."

As one of the "three marks" of existence, *anatman* tends to get promoted as an ontological truths. For scholars who see the Buddha as a "mystic," *anatman* is so subtle and beyond the ken of logic that we must forgo our ordinary ways of thinking, seeing, and perceiving to experience this non-substantial form of existence; while for those who see him as an "empiricist," *anatman* is the simple phenomenological perception of the empirical world.

And yet, the Buddha also teaches views that completely contradict the idea of *anatman*, making us to wonder about his commitment to either of the above positions. The most obvious example is found in the *Tevijja Sutta* of the *Digha Nikaya*, in which the Buddha instructs two young brahmans on the best way to attain union with the god, Brahma. Known as the *Brahma Vihara*, the Buddha's teaching runs as follows:

> And he lets his mind pervade one quarter of the world with thoughts of love, and so the second, and so the third, and so forth. And thus the whole wide world, above, below, around and everywhere, does he continue to pervade with heart of love, far reaching, grown great, and beyond measure. Just...as a mighty trumpeter makes himself heard--and that without difficulty--in all the four directions; even so of all things that have shape or life, there is not one that he passes by or leaves aside, but regards them all with mind set free, and deep felt love. Verily this...is the way to a state of union with Brahma.[20]

What is remarkable about this story, especially in relation to the philosophical accounts of the Buddha in Western literature, is that it contradicts the *anatman* doctrine. Rather than telling the brahmans that there is no "self," no God, and no underlying substance to existence, he offers them advice on the best way to attain union with God. This is an unacceptable teaching for many scholars, and there are attempts to resolve it by saying that the Buddha sometimes taught "false" views to the ignorant.[21]

This approach is too easy, however, especially when we keep in mind his resolution to gear all teachings to the immediate needs and dispositions of his audience. His initial hesitation to teach was replaced with this goal in mind, and must caution us against separating certain discourse as the "true" teachings from those which are simply a matter of *upayic* style. Once we accept the fact the Buddha decided to teach to specific intellectual and spiritual levels, there is no reason to suppose that this applies only to those "lesser" teaching, but might apply to those "higher" ones as well.

In fact, the early Mahayana tradition emphasizes this exact point by saying that the doctrine of *upaya* applies to every teaching, view, or discourse the Buddha ever expressed. In the *Lotus Sutra*, for example, it says that,

> Apart from the skilful means of the Buddha, there is no other vehicle to be found.[22]

What this means is that *upaya* does not just refer to "lesser" teachings, but to all teachings. "Skilful means" is thus the very core of the Buddha's message, according to the *Lotus Sutra*, and tells us how to interpret his teachings.

> Did I not say before that the buddhas, the world-honored ones, proclaim the Dharma by various karmic reasonings, parables, forms of words and skilful means, all for the sake of supreme, perfect enlightenment?[23]

Even the idea of *nirvana*, as many Mahayana texts state, is simply another "skilful means" of the Buddha.

> For this reason, Sariputra,
> I set up a skilful means for them,
> Expounding the way to end all sufferings,
> And showing it by nirvana[24]

If we accept the Mahayana insight into the *upayic* nature of the Buddha's teachings then any puzzle surrounding the Buddha's discourse to the brahmans vanishes. Whether God (i.e., Brahma) exists or not is irrelevant, since he utilized a "skilful mean"--a "raft" to ferry these particular brahmans across the stream. But he could also teach ideas that were completely opposite from this, such as *anatman*. Nagarjuna expresses this point when he says,

> That there is a self has been taught,
> And the doctrine of no-self.
> By the Buddhas, as well as the

Doctrine of neither self nor nonself.[25]

For the purpose of helping others, the doctrine of *upaya* allows the Buddha to adopt any number of philosophical positions, even those which may seem "speculative" and "metaphysical." Such skill is utilized skillfully in Zen, where a "master" will give "one person a stick while kicking someone else's away." In other words, depending on one person's psychological makeup the Zen master may teach an atman-like doctrine (to a nihilist, for example), while to another he teaches "non-self." To ask which is more "true," the teaching of "self" or "non-self," misses the point-- since both are meant to function as "skilful means."

There is thus something wrong in the idea that the Buddha rejected "metaphysical" ideas. David Kalupahana, for example, takes the Buddha to be a type of Logical Positivist who rejects all statements that cannot be "meaningfully" asserted, "in that they do not communicate anything that is given in experience (*dhamma*), where experience is understood in terms of the felt results (*attha*) rather than in terms of an indefinable ultimate reality,"[26] Why Kalupahana thinks that the idea of "indefinable ultimate reality" cannot have "felt results" is unclear, for such beliefs have obviously influenced many people, the results of which are oftentimes profound.

A different version of Kalupahana's view is put forward by a number of recent scholars characterize Buddhist philosophy as an attack on transcendental principles, a-temporal views, or timeless truths. Even though thinkers as diverse as Robinson, Garfield, Huntington, Gudmenson, and Siderits disagree both between themselves and with Kalupahana over the specific philosophical position of Buddhism, they nevertheless converge on a "anti-metaphysical," "anti-realist" and "anti-transcendental" reading of Buddhism. The heart of Buddhist philosophy, they say, rejects such views as untenable.

The difficulty with this strong "anti-metaphysical" stance, however, is that it glosses over those passages where the Buddha does in fact describe an "ultimate" and "indefinable" reality. In speaking of *nirvana*, for example, the Buddha's teachings can easily be read metaphysically.

> The stopping of becoming is Nirvana.
> *Samyutta-nikaya* II, 117.[27]

> Nirvana do I call it--the utter extinction of aging and dying.
> *Samyutta-nikaya* I, 39.[28]

> There is, monks, that plane where there is neither extension nor...motion nor the plane of infinite ether...nor that of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, neither this world nor another, neither the moon nor the sun. Here, monks, I say that there is no coming or going or remaining or deceasing or uprising, for this is itself without support, without continuance, without mental object--this is itself the end of suffering. There is, monks, an unborn, not become, not made, uncompounded, and were it not, monks, for this unborn, not become, not made, uncompounded, no escape could be shown here for what is born, has become, is made, is compounded. But because there is, monks, an unborn, not become, not made, uncompounded, therefore an escape can be shown for what is born, has become, is made, is compounded.
> *Udana*, 80-81. [29]

Such passages occur frequently in the early Pali discourses, and they fall short in regards an "anti-metaphysical" interpretation. Therefore, to be fair to the Buddhist canon, as well as to the different teaching methods which the Buddha employed, we should admit that the he was willing to teach certain ideas which sound just as metaphysical and just as transcendent as the Orthodox Hindu conception of *Atman*. In light of the *upaya* notion, however, this does not make him inconsistent. On the contrary, it simply reveals his sensitivity to his audiences' needs and his ability to use "contradictory" viewpoint depending on the contextual dispositions of that audience.

The important thing to note at this point is that when we speak of the Buddha's teachings as "skilful means" we find it difficult to reconcile with any "philosophical" position. *Upayas* are supposed to be strategies: they signify a certain methodology--for

teaching, helping, and curing. What they require in order to perform "skillfully" is a "Buddha-eye"--a certain way of addressing individuals that considers their context and their karmic dispositions. They are non-philosophical because they begin with assumption that to help others attain liberation one needs only to "see" their position in life. The method of *upaya* is thus engaged and practical: it renounces "Truth" just as the bodhisattvas have renounced final entry in *nirvana*, and it is this very renunciation of "Truth," in fact, which allows for the plurality of pedagogical and heuristic styles which the term signifies.

The Buddha was not silent when it came to those who proposed theories and truths in a non-*upayic* way, however, as is evident from the following dialogue between him and a young brahman.

> 'Venerable Gotama, there are the ancient holy scriptures of the Brahmans handed down along the line by unbroken oral tradition of texts. With regard to them, Brahmans come to the absolute conclusion: "This alone is Truth, and everything else is false." Now, what does the Venerable Gotama say about this?'
> The Buddha inquired: 'Among Brahmans is there any one single Brahman who claims that he personally knows and sees that "This alone is Truth, and everything else is false?"
> 'No.'
> 'Then, is there any one single teacher, or a teacher of teachers of Brahmans back to the seventh generation, or even any of the those original authors of those scriptures, who claims that he knows and he sees: "This alone is Truth, and everything else is false"?'
> 'No.'
> 'Then, it is like a line of blind men, each holding on to the preceding one; the first one does not see, the middle one also does not see, the last one also does not see. Thus, it seems to me that the state of the Brahmans is like that of a line of blind men.'[30]

Then the Buddha gave his advice: "It is not proper for a wise man who maintains truth to come to the conclusion: 'This alone is Truth, and everything else is false'...A man has a faith. If he says 'This is my faith,' so far he maintains truth. But by that he

cannot proceed to the absolute conclusion: 'This alone is Truth and everything else is false.'"[31]

The Buddha's problem with these brahmans has little to "metaphysical" teachings. It appears he could care less whether their views are metaphysical, empirical, atheistic or materialist. What he argues against is the practice of bad "medicine"--i.e., the preaching universal "Truths." In doing this, they have become blind to the actual karmic dispositions of embodied creatures, and, therefore, do more harm than good.

The Buddha continues this line of thought n the *Brahmajala-suttanta* where he refers to the sixty-two different philosophical views that dominated the Indian scene during that time. "In this way and that," says the Buddha, referring to the proponents of these views,

> they plunge about in the net of these sixty-two modes, but they are in it; this way and that they flounder, but they are included in it, caught in it.[32]

The "net" these views share is a form of absolutism which he considers harmful. They share, for the Buddha, a commitment to one of two extremes: existence or non-existence. The Upanishadic, Samkhya, and Jain traditions, for example, uphold the former by asserting some form of eternal substance as the ultimate ground of existence, whether it be *Brahman*, *purusha*, or the *jivas*; while the Carvaka tradition, on the other hand, goes to the other extreme in denying any form of eternal substance, affirming instead a purely materialistic account of reality. Though each tradition differs in its description of existence, they all nevertheless share the common assumption that their own views are objective and absolute, and thus fall prey to the type of dogmatism which the Buddha saw as a major source of suffering and conflict in life. Dissatisfied with each of the "sixty-two" philosophical views, the Buddha forged what he considered to be an altogether different approach to philosophy, which was an attempt to stay clear from the

entangled "net" of absolutism. "Without approaching either extreme, the Tathagata teaches you the Doctrine of the Middle."

Although scholars disagree over what the "doctrine of the Middle amounts to (i.e., mysticism, conventionalism, empiricism, deconstructionism, etc.), it is clear that the Buddha wants to stay clear of the "net" of absolutism. If we place this in the context of "skilful means," the "Doctrine of the Middle" amounts to shifting the debate away from philosophical concerns to how such views work as "rafts."

This idea will no doubt sound philosophically frivolous to some. Philosophers are usually taught to frown upon anything which smacks of relativism or inconsistency. Thus to say that the Buddha wanted to shift the practice of doing "philosophy" away from coming up with the single accurate description of things and instead toward a more inclusive approach which recognizes a plurality of different "truths," may sound naive. Nevertheless, it was just this type of philosophical "naiveté" which the Buddha recommended. This notion is not totally foreign to Western philosophers, however, as Nietzsche also argues against a conception of knowledge which says that for something to be "true" it must be independent of any particular context or perspective, he says:

> Let us be on our guard against the hallowed philosophers' myth of a "pure, will'less, painless, timeless knower"; let us beware of the tentacles of such contradictory notions as "pure reason," "absolute knowledge," absolute intelligence." All these concepts presuppose an eye such as no living being can imagine, an eye required to have no direction, to abrogate its active and interpretative powers--precisely those powers that alone make of seeing, seeing *something*. All seeing is essentially perspective, and so is all knowing. The more affects we allow to speak in a given matter, the more different eyes we can put on in order to view a given spectacle, the more complete will be our conception of it, the greater our "objectivity.[33]

The Buddhist doctrine of *upaya* is similar to what Nietzsche in other places refers to as the ability to move freely through a variety of standpoints and philosophical positions. While abandoning the commitment to a fixed and eternal truth, the Buddha nevertheless approached the practical life-problems of individuals from many different

perspectives. It is in this sense that the Buddha did not have any particular philosophical position: not because he felt that one had to lose all particular perspectives or "views" to achieve objectivity or truth--but because the entire project of constructing philosophical theories was incomparable to helping others achieve liberation.

The Teaching of Dependent Arising

Along with the doctrine of *anatman*, there are many scholars who interpret "dependent arising" as an ontological "truth." All things, it is commonly said, are radically interrelated, dependent upon causes and conditions, which are themselves dependent upon other conditions, and so on. No "thing," person, or event exists in isolation, but, like Indra's Net, all are intertwined from the very beginning. Even the Buddha says in one place, "He who perceives *pratitya-samutpada* perceives the *Dhamma*." Many scholars stress that dependent arising is the only acceptable way to think of the world, that, in fact, any conception of the world as having an essence, a substance, a *svabhava*, or an "inherent nature" is logically absurd.[34] Thus, to see the world as "despondently arisen" is necessary for liberation since it means overcoming a "false" view of taking things essentially.

Given that the Buddha warned against the tendency to reify "dependent arising" into a "truth," however, such a reading would be misleading. After explaining *pratitya-samutpada* to his disciples who acknowledged that they understood it clearly, the Buddha made the following remark:

> O, Bhikkhus, even this view, which is so pure and so clear, if you cling to it, if you fondle it, if you treasure it, if you are attached to it, then you do not understand that the teaching is similar to a raft, which is for crossing over, and not for getting hold of.[35]

The teaching of "dependent arising" is central to all Buddhist traditions, and yet the Buddha warns against turning it into a "philosophical" notion. To "fondle" *pratitya-samutpada*, to treasure it, or become attached to it, is to treat it in a non-*upayic* way--as something more than a raft, something which should be taken up once we reach the other shore. More specifically, it means to treat "dependent arising" in a non-contextual way in which one could assert "This alone is truth, and everything else is false."

To those who are attached to things, objects, or "views" as absolute, the Buddha recommended trying to see things as "dependently arisen," in other words, trying to see that the objects or "views" that one is attached to, such as a fixed sense of self or transcendental principle, are in fact dependent on causes and conditions. In other words, he tried to get them to see that their "views" are relational, dependent upon the context and ways of life of those who hold them. In this way, the Buddha hoped that the "attached" person would loosen their grip on what they take to be absolute and accept it in a more open and practical way. The Buddha's discourse on causality, or dependent arising (*Pratitya-samutpada*), is thus a provisional device to solve the problem of "blind attachment."

To the young brahmans we referred to earlier, the Buddha taught love of god, while to his ascetics friends he taught *duhkha* and "non-self," and it this willingness to teach a plurality of views which reveals his soteriological open-mindedness. In this sense, he resembles William James who, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, bracketed off questions concerning the mere "truth value" of religious statements and instead analyzed how peoples lives were transformed through different types of religious experiences. "Not by its origin, but *the way in which it works on the whole*," says James, expressing his unwillingness to judge a religious experience apart from how it "works" as a lived event.[36] James' depiction of the "sick soul" versus the "healthy-minded" soul is an example of how the same metaphysical or religious view can impact

peoples lives in radically different ways. Whereas an experience of God may make one person depressed, heavy, and guilt-ridden, to another it creates an overwhelming sense of peace and tranquillity. Pye remarks on a similar idea when he says that, according to Buddhism, "the same item of doctrine may be both a barrier and a door depending on how it is used."[37] The Buddha would agree with James's approach in that it refuses to reduce the truth of a religious experience to mere factual coherence or "meaningful statements." The value of any particular philosophical or religious view lies in its effectiveness, which cannot be determined apart from the way it plays itself out in people's lives.

The Buddha's Silence

We are now in a position to appreciate one of the most puzzling issues in early Buddhism: the "Buddha's silence." His response to what is traditionally called the "fourteen unanswered questions," or *avyakata*, is by no means easy to decipher, given the fact that a response of silence is open to an infinite number of interpretations not only by the person who asked the question, but by students of Buddhism who want to know the reason for his silence. Nevertheless, in the context of the Buddha's overall aim of deconstructing attachment, and his view that certain speculative matters are not relevant to attaining this goal, his reason for not answering certain types of questions should not be too difficult to understand.

The most famous example of the "unanswered questions" occurs in Sutta 63 of the *Majjhima Nikaya*, where a disciple of the Buddha, Malunkyaputta, demands to know why the Buddha refuses to answer certain questions.

> Thus have I heard. On a certain occasion The Blessed One was dwelling at Sarvatthi in Jetavana monastery in Anathapindika's Park. Now it happened to the venerable Malunkyaputta, being in seclusion and plunged in meditation, that a consideration presented itself to his mind as follows: "These theories which the

> Blessed One has left unelucidated, has set aside and rejected,--that the world is eternal, that the world is not eternal, that the world is finite, that the world is infinite, that the soul and the body are identical, that the soul is one thing and the body another, that the saint exists after death, that the saint does not exist after death, that the saint both exists and does not exist after death, that the saint neither exists nor does not exist after death,--these The Blessed One does not elucidate to me. And the fact the Blessed one does not elucidate them to me does not please me nor suit me. Therefore I will draw near to The Blessed One and inquire of him concerning this matter.[38]

Mulunkyaputta then goes to the Buddha and adds that if he fails to solve these problems then he will return to his previous life as a layman and stop following the *dhamma*. By joining the pairs, eternal-non-eternal and infinite-finite, there are fourteen questions to which the Buddha refused to answer:

1. Is the universe eternal?
2 Is the universe non-eternal?
3. Is the universe at one and the same time eternal and non-eternal?
4. Is the universe neither eternal nor non-eternal?
5. Is the universe infinite?
6. Is the universe finite?
7. Is the universe at one and the same time infinite and finite?
8. Is the universe neither infinite nor finite?
9. Is the soul identical to the body?
10. Is the soul different from the body?
11. Does the Tathagata survive death?
12. Does the Tathagata not survive death?
13. Does the Tathagata both survive death and not survive death?
14. Does the Tathagata neither survive death nor not survive death?

All of the above questions refer in one way or another back to the "sixty-two" views which the Buddha refused to accept. Thus, the first eight questions refer to the extent and duration of the world, the next two to the nature of personal identity, and the last four to the status of the dead saint, or, more specifically, to life after death. Not only did these questions dominate the Indian philosophical and religious scene of the day, but they were generally answered affirmatively and therefore accepted as true propositions

depending on which philosophical tradition one adopts. Thus, the view that the world is eternal was a basic assumption in the Brahmanic tradition which asserted that the true nature of the world (and the soul) is unchanging and eternally pure; the opposite position was propounded by the Carvakas who denied the eternality of the world (and the soul) by maintaining that the true nature of existence can only be defined in terms of material particles and random causal connections; while the Jains, on the other hand, adopted a type of middle position by asserting that the world is both eternal and non-eternal at the same time.

We have already seen that the Buddha dismissed all of the "sixty-two" views on the grounds that each dogmatically asserts, "This alone is Truth, and everything else is false." In regards to those specific questions listed above, however, the Buddha was unwilling to offer any positive critique whatsoever. His reasons for doing so have puzzled Buddhist thinkers, such that the "Silence of the Buddha," as it is called, provides a hermeneutic space where a wealth of opposing interpretations arise, such as, for example, that his silence represents the inability of language to describe Ultimate Truth, or that it points to what Carnap would call "meaningless" propositions, or that he simply had nothing to say. The first two are the most commonly asserted reasons of the Buddha's silence, which we need to examine in more depth. Before that, however, we should let the Buddha speak for himself. After Mulunkyaputta asks the Buddha why he persistently refuses to answer the questions, the Buddha's response is this:

> The religious life, Malunkyaputta, does not depend on the view that the world is eternal; nor does the religious life, Malunkyaputta, depend on the dogma that the world is not eternal. Whether the view obtain, Malunkyaputta, that the world is eternal, or that the world is not eternal, there still remain birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair... Why, Malunkyaputta, have I not explained this? Because, Malunkyaputta, this profits not, nor has to do with the fundamentals of religion, nor tends to aversion, absence of passion, cessation, quiescence, supreme wisdom, and Nirvana; therefore, have I not explained it?[39]

The Buddha also tells Malunkyaputta that his demand for an answer to these questions is like a man who has been shot and wounded by an arrow, but before deciding to have the arrow pulled out he demands to know who shot the arrow, the family and town he is from, if he is tall, or short, and so forth.[40] In other words, the Buddha chides Malunkyaputta for demanding answers to certain questions which have little or nothing to do with overcoming hatred, greed, and blind attachment. The issue here is not whether the questions can be answered, or whether they reflect propositionally true or false statements regarding existence, but is an issue of which questions are more helpful (or skillful) in guiding a person toward a soteriological experience. One does not go to a deaf person with questions about musical harmony and tone, for example, nor to a blind person with questions about visual perception and color. Only under extreme circumstances would such questions even make sense. Similarly, one should not tell someone who is dying to take a vacation, or advise an infant on how to be an adult. Such advice seems not only out of place--but absurd. The Buddha's advice to Malunkyaputta is thus pertinent: he advises him not to worry about questions regarding the origin of the universe, the soul, or life after death, and tells him that his silence regarding such questions is itself the answer: "Therefore, have I not explained it?" meaning that such questions should not be considered practically relevant for those seeking to transform their lives in a religious way.

The Buddha's response to Malunkyaputta, and his relation to the "fourteen unanswered questions," is interesting in that it points to the Buddha's struggle to shift the emphasis of philosophical practice away from insignificant issues toward the concrete problems of everyday life. The difference here is not between philosophy and religion, or even between theory and practice, rather, the difference lies between one who thinks that the "truth" of a view or a theory is a necessary prerequisite for

liberation, and one who thinks that what matters most is overcoming specific, practical problems, like the inability to love or solving difficult ethical issues. The first asks questions like, "*what is* the good life?" or "*what is* truth?" while the second asks "*how* can I overcome this problem? or "*how* should I deal with this dilemma?" The Buddha regarded the former approach as misleading in that it never seriously addresses the problems at hand, and tried to get people like Malunkyaputta to focus on more concrete problems, which for the Buddha had to do with our attachment. Uprooting this attachment, which is the same as achieving freedom in Buddhism, does not depend on the truth or falsity of whether the world is eternal, whether the soul is identical to the body, or whether there is life after death.

This practical approach of the Buddha is apparent not only in regards to certain speculative views, but includes even those "truths" which the Buddha himself voiced. It was already noted that the Buddha warned against reifying the Dharma into a static principle by emphasizing that they were but "rafts, for crossing over, not for retaining," which is an insistence on their provisional status. In the *Samyutta Nikaya*, for example, the Buddha refuses to answer questions which he had elsewhere expressed to be the basis of his own philosophical system. The story takes place when a certain wandering monk named Vacchagotta asks the Buddha whether there is an *Atman*. Vacchagotta comes to the Buddha and asks:

> Venerable Gotama, is there an *Atman*?"
> The Buddha is silent.
> "Then Venerable Gotama, is there no *Atman*?"
> Again the Buddha is silent.
> Vacchagotta gets up and goes away.
> After the Parivrajaka (Wanderer) had left, Ananda asks the Buddha why he did not answer Vacchagota's question. The Buddha explains his position:
> "Ananda, when asked by Vacchagotta the Wanderer: 'Is there a self?', if I had answered: 'there is a self', then, Ananda, that would be siding with those recluses and brahmans who hold the eternalist theory."

"And, Ananda, when asked by the Wanderer: 'Is there no self?' if I had answered: 'There is no self', then that would be siding with those recluses and brahmans who hold the annihilationist theory."
"Again, Ananda, when asked by Vacchagotta: 'Is there a self?', if I had answered: 'There is a self', would that be in accordance with my knowledge that all *dhammas* are without self?"
"Surely not, Sir."
"And again, Ananda, when asked by the Wanderer: 'Is there no self?', if I had answered: 'There is no self', then that would have been a greater confusion to the already confused Vacchagotta. For he would have thought: Formerly indeed I had a self, but now I haven't got one.[41]

What is important about this story is that the Buddha once again links his response of silence to the specific needs of a particular person. What the Buddha may think is "true" in this case is irrelevant, for even though he says that he has no knowledge of an *Atman*, he nevertheless does not want to confuse poor Vacchagotta any more than he already is. If the Buddha thought that "the truth sets you free"--and that it should always be spoken no matter what, then he would not have remained silent to Vacchagotta's questions, and nor would he have been silent with Malunkyaputta. In both cases, he refuses to answer the specific questions asked of him, since to do so would miss the entire point of his project which was to loosen the threads of attachment. Whether he answered yes or no to Vacchagotta's question regarding the self, and whether or not it was the "true" answer, it would have done more damage--since Vacchagotta was in desperate need of a truth, any truth, to cling to. As Rahula says,

> There are many references in the Pali texts to this same Vacchagotta the Wanderer, his going round quite often to see the Buddha and his disciples and putting the same kind of question again and again, evidently very much worried, almost obsessed by these problems. The Buddha's silence seems to have had much more effect on Vacchagotta than any eloquent answer or discussion.[42]

Thus, the Buddha remained silent, as an *upaya*, to try and stop poor Vacchagotta from sinking deeper and deeper into "blind attachment."

Much of the writing on the "silence of the Buddha," however, fails to interpret his silence as an *upaya*. It is generally thought, in one way or another, that his silence points to something more mysterious, more philosophically deep and metaphysical than a simple heuristic device. As far as I am aware, Troy Organ's article, "The Silence of the Buddha," is one of few to make explicit the idea that the Buddha's response should be seen pragmatically.

> The picture we get of the Buddha is that of a remarkably single-minded man. Speculation was not only useless but harmful, for it would sidetrack him from his main goal. He had no disinterested love for truth. He admitted that he had more truths which he might disclose, but he refrained and limited himself to the revelation of only those truths which he considered to be religiously significant. Truth was a value for him only when it was a means to man's release from suffering. For Gautama, all knowledge was ideology, that is, all knowledge was held and expressed for certain reasons. His *dharma* was revealed only because it contributed to man's salvation.[43]

Though I think Organ is generally correct here, he tends to see the Buddha as anti-philosophical and, to some extent, anti-intellectual in relation to that which is purely religious. This dichotomy seems not only false, but unfair to the Buddha who often employed logical analysis to get his point across. As Nagao says, "I submit that the Buddha was not only a religionist; he was also a philosopher. Certainly, at first glance the Buddha is seen as a misologist, concerned with only the salvation of humankind. But beneath that compassion is found a highly analytical mind."[44] Nevertheless, the manner in which Organ emphasizes the Buddha's pragmatic approach is relatively unique, especially when it comes to the relationship between metaphysical questions and the problem of the Buddha's silence.

The differences in these positions is clear when we compare Organ's reading to thinkers such as T.R.V. Murti, who says that the "true nature" of the Buddha's silence "can only be interpreted as meaning the consciousness of the indescribable nature of the

Unconditioned Reality;"[45] or to Gadjin Nagao, who says that "The inadequacy of language must be regarded as an important key in understanding the problem of the fourteen unanswered questions," since, for the Buddha, "Ultimate Truth is beyond the reach of verbal designation or thought construct."[46] For Murti and Nagao, as well as many other Buddhist writers, silence was the only legitimate response the Buddha could have offered, since there is no other way to reveal that which is beyond language and conceptual polarities except by *showing it* through the gesture of a "noble silence."

Kalupahana opposes this "transcendental" reading of the Buddha's silence on the grounds that a non-linguistic and non-conceptual Ultimate Truth is not something which the Buddha thought could be verified through sense experience; and thus, when it comes to the Buddha's silence, Kalupahana naturally sees it as an attempt on the part of the Buddha to preclude asking "metaphysical" questions.

> Since no answer based on experience is possible, the Buddha remained silent when pressed for an answer and maintained that the questions as to whether the *tathagata* exists (*hoti*) or arises (*uppajjati*), does not exist or does not arise, both or neither, do not fit the case (*na upeti*). It is like asking whether unicorns exist or not...As the Logical Positivists themselves maintain, (such) metaphysical statements are meaningless because they are not verified in experience.[47]

Organ's approach seems to me to be more in accord with the Buddha's "middle path" than either of these other two positions. In both of the stories cited above, the Buddha states his reasons for not answering the questions explicitly, and they have nothing to do with the idea of language being either: 1. a barrier to ultimate truth, or 2. a set of propositions which are meaningful only upon empirical verification. Rather, the Buddha tells Malunkyaputta that such questions "tend not to edification," in other words, that they are not skillful tools or profitable devices (*upaya*) on the road to achieving happiness. Likewise, when he tells his disciple, Ananda, the reason for being

silent to Vacchagotta's question whether there is an *Atman*, there is no evidence to suggest that what he *really* meant was that the questions could not be answered on linguistic grounds. He simply says that he does not want to confuse Vacchagotta any further. Rather than pointing to any definite philosophical picture, either of the extra-linguistic or the Logical Positivist type, the Buddha's silence seems much more practical, signifying nothing more than a simple desire to help others.

There is nevertheless a strong tendency among many Buddhist writers to limit the Buddha to one set philosophical picture of existence, with the idea that liberation is contingent upon this view. This attempt discover the "true" philosophical position of the Buddha is no doubt a major reason for so many conflicting interpretations, and is similar to the famous story in the *Udana* where the Buddha tells of a king who sought to resolve a dispute in his court by bringing in some blind men and having them touch different parts of an elephant and trying to get them to describe what they felt. Within minute the blind men started arguing because they disagreed on what they were feeling. "In such points," says the king, "Brahmans and recluses stick wrangling on them, they violently discuss--poor folk! They see but one side of the shield."[48]

Much of the debate over the Buddha's silence, however, is understandable. A gesture of silence is no doubt a powerful response in certain situations, but it can also have the opposite effect of generating speculation upon that very silence. If the point of the silence was to preclude certain people from demanding answers to speculative questions, then the Buddha's success in using silence as an *upaya* is questionable. The tendency to cling to views as absolute is a common problem, and it is doubtful whether silence can act as a curative weapon against it. Instead of quelling the need for attachments and dispelling the desire for a fixed "truth," the Buddha's silence seems to have done just the opposite and incited a host of interpretations which seek for the "truth" behind what he did *not* say. It may be possible, however, that when the Buddha

likened his teachings to "rafts" he thought it would be taken seriously. Perhaps when he said, referring to the basis of his teachings, "if you cling to it, if you fondle it, if you treasure it, if you are attached to it, then you do not understand that the teaching is similar to a raft, which is for crossing over, and not for getting hold of," he had no idea that a simple gesture of silence could be discussed with such philosophical vigor.

Summary

The point I have tried to develop in this section is that the Buddha's teachings are not so much "theories" as they are *methods* for helping others. A problem arises when we take the method for a theory, i.e., when we extract the content of the Buddha's teachings from its rhetorical and pedagogical context. If we take the Buddha's initial hesitation to teach seriously, and if we accept his decision to teach only in relation to the contextual needs and dispositions of his audience, then we commit a grave mistake when we attribute a "theory" or "truth" to what he says. The Buddha's first sermons were given to his former companions, severe ascetics who were trying to discover the "Self" through self-mortification. It is thus no wonder why he tells them to avoid extremes by staying in the "middle" and even less of a wonder why he tells them that there is no "self." Both teachings make obvious sense when we take into consideration his audience and what they were doing. But to develop a "theory" about the nature of reality from these first sermons is to overlook not only the reasons why the Buddha taught such views, but his desire to help these particular people in the way he did.

The following section will continue the theme of "skilful means" by looking at how the early Buddhists themselves fell into the trap of theorizing the *dhamma*. It was not long after the Buddha's death that a highly sectarian form of scholasticism developed in India, and Buddhists began debating among themselves over the status of the

Buddha's teachings. There soon developed organized sects or schools, each with its own body of literature and philosophical texts known as, *abhidharma*. What unites these different traditions is their penchant for philosophical analysis. The Buddha's teachings on *nirvana*, dependent arising, the five *skandhas*, as well as Buddhist notions of space, time, and causality, were broken down and analyzed with microscopic precision. The motivation behind such analysis was the attempt to not only ground the Buddha's teachings on sound epistemological principles, but more important, it was the attempt to discover, through the conceptual clarification of all experience, the "true" nature of reality. Thus, the two main schools, the Sarvastivada and the Sautrantaka, debated over whether causality can be defined by appeal to ultimate atomic elements or not, or whether time is by its very nature momentary and fragmented, or continuous and formed with its own self-nature (*svabhava*). It was thought that by a correct analysis of these terms, as well as a correct analysis of all the factors that constitute human experience, one would come to "know" the ultimate causes and conditions of existence, and hence, of suffering, and *then* proceed to "burn up" one's attachment to them. Before all else, however, it was thought that the correct "view" of reality was needed, since without first having the right conception of experience one would never be able to achieve the perfection of Nirvana.

Nagarjuna's place in these debates is crucial. As the leading philosopher of the Mahayana tradition, he was critical of the Abhidharmic analysis of experience and the entire project of trying to come up with the philosophically "correct" view of experience. Though there are many different interpretations as to what, if anything, Nagarjuna sought to propose as an alternative to the Abhidharma tradition, the thesis that will be developed in the remainder of this study is that he was trying to recapture the idea of "skilful means" as the fundamental significance of the Buddha's teachings. Based firmly within the *Prajnaparamitra* texts which rehearse again and again the idea that all of the

Buddha's teachings are "provisional devices," Nagarjuna can be seen as scolding the Abhidharma philosophers for falling into the trap of searching for foundational descriptions of existence, and therefore missing the entire point of the doctrine of *upaya*. Forgetting that when the Buddha spoke of *nirvana*, dependent arising, impermanence, and so forth, he was not committed to any objective or ontological truth to which these words might refer, but rather used them with the sole intent of helping others, the Abhidharma philosophers sought to discover the underlying metaphysical basis of his doctrines. Nagarjuna's project was to demonstrate the impossibility of such an enterprise. His dialectic of *sunyata*, or "emptiness," is a continuation of the Buddha's silence on a higher philosophical level: whereas the Buddha refused to answer certain metaphysical questions, Nagarjuna provides a whole series of reductios which reveal the futility of searching for any ultimate ground, and thus tries to uproot through deconstructive logic the desire to remain fixed to philosophical views (*drstis*). The whole process of his dialectic, however, is a "skilful means," and what Nagarjuna calls, "the emptiness of emptiness," is but the embodiment of the Buddha's entire approach to philosophy as *upaya*.

To get a clearer picture of Nagarjuna's mission we first need to understand the philosophical milieu in which he was situated. The next chapter will thus examine the major tenets of the Abhidharma tradition, and will show how they veered away from the practice of *upaya* by searching for the ultimate constituents of existence, or *dharmas*. By understanding what the Abhidharma tradition was up to, Nagarjuna's own philosophical thought, as well as his connection to the Buddha, should become more evident.

NOTES

[1] *Majjhima-nikaya* , Edward Conze, trans., *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages*, (Philosophical Library, Inc. 1954) p. 87-88.

[2] *Alagaddupama Sutta*, of the *Majjhima Nikaya* , Henry Clarke Warren, trans., *Buddhism in Translations*. Harvard Oriental Series, Vol. III (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1986), p. 133

[3] *Madhyamikakarikas*, Ch XVIII; 6, Jay Garfield, trans., *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 49.

[4] T.R.V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, (George Allen and Unwin Ltd. 1955), pp. 46-49.

[5] Gadjin M. Nagao, *Madhayamika and Yogacara*, (Albany: State University of New York, 1991), pp. 40.

[6] See, for example, David Loy, "The Paradox of Causality in Madhyamika,"*International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 25. (1985): p. 63-72), and "The Cloture of Deconstruction: A Mahayana Critique of Derrida," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 27 (1987): p. 59-80.

[7] Edward Conze, "Mahayana Buddhism" in *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies*. (The University of South Carolina Press, 1968), p.77.

[8] David Kalupahana, *Nagarjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way*, (State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 13.

[9] David Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis*. (University of Hawaii Press, 1976), p. 29.

[10] *Aadittapariyaya-sutta*, Henry Clarke Warren, trans., *Buddhism in Translation*, (Harvard University Press,) p. 236-9

[11] Ibid., p. 30.

[12] *Aadittapariyaya-sutta*, Henry Clarke Warren, trans., *Buddhism in Translation*, (Harvard University Press,) p. 236-9

[13] Ibid., p. 78.

[14] *Sutta-Nipata*, E.A Burt, trans., *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*, (Mentor, 1985), p.46-47.

[15]*Saddharma-Pundarika or The Lotus of the True Law*, H. Kern, trans., *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. 21, (Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), p. 103.

[16]*Upayakausalya Sutra*, Mark Tatz, trans., (Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1994), p. 34..

[17] Ibid., p. 73-77.

[18] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, B. F. McGuinness, trans., (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), p. 74.

[19] Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, (Grove Press, Inc., New York, 1974), p. 63.

[20] *Tevijja Sutta* , Rhys-Davids, trans., *Dialogues of the Buddha: Sacred Books of the Buddhists*, Vol. II (London: Oxford University Press, 1899), p. 310.

[21] See, for example, Alicia Matsunaga, "The Concept of Upaya in Mahayana Buddhist Philosophy, *Japanese Journal of Religious* Studies, 1/1, (March 1974), p. 51-72.

[22] *Saddharma-Pundarika or The Lotus of the True Law*, H. Kern, trans., (Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), p. 103.

[23] Ibid., p. 103.

[24] Ibid., p. 54.

[25] Nagarjuna, *Madhyamakakarika*, Ch. XVIII; 6, Jay Garfield, trans., *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 49.

[26] David Kalupahana, *Nagarjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way,* (State University of New York Press, 1986) p. 19.

[27]*Samyutta-nikaya* II, 117, Edward Conze, trans., *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages*, (Philosophical Library, Inc. 1954.), p. 93.

[28] Ibid., p.90.

[29] *Udana*, 80-8, Conze, trans., *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages*, (Philosophical Library, Inc 1954), p. 94-95.

[30]*Majjihima-nikaya*, Rahula, trans., *What the Buddha Taught*, (Grove Press, Inc., New York, 1974), p. 10.

[31] Ibid., p.10.

[32] *Brahmajala-suttanta* , T. W. Rhys Davids, trans., *Dialogues of the Buddha: Sacred Books of the Buddhists*, Vol. II (London: Oxford University Press, 1899), p. 54.

[33] Frederick Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, Walter Kaufmann, trans., (Vintage Books, 1969), p. 119.

[34] See, for example, Garfield (1995), Siderits (1993), Huntington (1989), Gudmunsen (1977), and Kalupahana (1986).

[35] *Majjihima-nikaya*, Rahula (1974.), p.11.

[36] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (The Modern Library Edition, 1936), p. 21.

[37] Michael Pye, (1978), p. 134.

[38] *Majjhima Nikaya* , Henry Clarke Warren, trans., *Buddhism in Translations*. Harvard Oriental Series, Vol. III (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1986), p. 117.

[39] Ibid., p. 119.

[40] Ibid., p. 122.

[41] *Majjhima-Nikaya*, Rahula (1974), p.62-63.

[42] Ibid., p.64.

[43] Troy Organ, "The Silence of the Buddha," *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 4 (1954): p. 125-140.

[44] Gadjin M. Nagao, *Madhyamika and Yogacara*, (State University of New York Press, 1991; p. 38.

[45] T.R.V. Murti, (1955), p 48.

[46] Nagao, (1991), p.40-41.

[47] Kalupahana, (1976), p. 157-158.

[48] *Udana*' T. W. Rhys Davids, trans., *Sacred Books of the Buddhists*, Vol. II, (London: Oxford University Press, 1899), p.188.

CHAPTER III

THE SCHOLASTIC MEDICINE: ABHIDHARMA BUDDHISM

Introduction

The thesis of the first chapter centered on the idea that the Buddha's teachings are best understood as methodological devices (skilful means) for helping others. What I emphasized is a tension in Buddhist thought between the desire to discover a "truth" about the world, or the mind, or experience, and the ability to use any number of heuristic "devices" which best suit the needs of others. There is a tension here because the idea of "skilful means" resists a totalizing approach to sentient beings and their problems. While a "truthful" analysis begins with a theoretical "map" of reality and says that one must adopt this or that view to attain liberation, the practice of "skilful means" begins with the concrete differences of individuals and works from there. In this sense, the practice of "skilful means" has no assumptions regarding "truth" and no theory that says one must acquire a certain ontological picture to be healed. It simply starts with *this* individual and adopts the best strategy that suits her contextual disposition. What "skilful means" resists in "truth" is a tendency toward abstraction, a movement that takes us away from the concrete differences of individuals and toward a detached view of suffering and pain. As a methodology for helping others, what "skilful means" needs to perform skillfully is not truth but an openness to the problems of sentient beings as they arise from within their own karmic-stream.

The "three marks" of existence covered in the last chapter were thus described as heuristic devices which arose within a specific pedagogical and rhetorical context. The doctrine of *anatman*, for example, was not an ontological doctrine given to everyone universally, but developed in direct response to the Hindu conception of an eternal and abiding "Self" which can lead, according to the Buddha, to desperate longings for transcendence and extreme ascetic practices. The Buddha's ability to teach other views diametrically opposed to the "three marks," however, as well as his insistence that his teachings not be turned into "truths," points us in the direction of seeing the *dhamma* in a "non-philosophical"--but pedagogical engaged--way.

The scholastic Abhidharma tradition that arose after the Buddha, however, did not see it this way. The "three-marks" were accepted by most Abhidharma thinkers as philosophical truths describing the structure of the universe. This is evident in two important ways: first, they divided the Buddha's teachings into two categories by distinguishing between those which describe an "ultimate" truth from those which are merely "conventional." The discourses which are narrative in scope, for example, or which rely on metaphor, simile, and anecdotes were to relegated to an inferior, "conventional" status, while those that used purely analytic descriptions were considered "absolute." These latter teachings, according to the Abhidharma thinkers, are the "literal" sayings of the Buddha, while the former are merely symbolic accounts that he used for the ignorant.

Secondly, The Abhidharmists insisted that a metaphysical understanding is necessary for enlightenment. This is significant step away from viewing the *dhamma* as a "skilful mean" because it says one needs to know the "truths" behind the Buddha's teachings in order to attain liberation. Thus, the "three marks" of existence are not mere "devices" which are useful for some and not to others, according to the Abhidharmists, but

describe the ontological nature of reality which must be studied, analyzed, and known before entering the path of a Buddha.

One of the major philosophical problems of the Abhidharma tradition surrounds the nature of causation. Given that all things lack "self" and are impermanent--as the Buddha said--the problem the Abhidharma thinkers faced was trying to account for the causal relations between phenomena. This is an important issue because liberation was considered integral to the workings of the causal nexus, so integral, in fact, that without understanding how phenomena are related through the process of "dependent arising"--liberation would be impossible. The Buddha's twelve-fold chain of causation, for example, describes the process by which sentient beings become bound, and because all sentient beings exist within the "chain"--and are therefore "bound"--it was necessary to find a weak link to initiate release. The Abhidharma thinkers identified "ignorance" as this weak element, and said that its opposite, *prajna*, or knowledge, would break the cycles of bondage and suffering (*samsara*).

This section will focus on this manner of interpreting the Buddha's teachings. Its significance will be apparent after we place it in the context of Nagarjuna and the Mahayana tradition. Reacting against the Abhidharma analysis of experience, Nagarjuna struggles to revive the "skilful means" approach that was so vital to the historical Buddha. Equipped with the Mahayana tool of *sunyata*, or "emptiness," Nagarjuna attacks the idea that the Buddha's teachings are ontological descriptions, and in so doing tries to abolish the idea that one needs to know the nature of the world--e.g., causality--to attain liberation.

I will approach the Abhidharma analysis by first giving a brief overview of the history leading up to scholastic Buddhism. This will be important for situating the Mahayana tradition and Nagarjuna within a historical context in following chapters. After this brief overview, I will examine a few key elements in the Abhidharma metaphysics,

such as their analysis of the atomic elements of existence, *dharmas*, and the problems of trying to connect these elements through the laws of causality.

Early Buddhist Schisms

It was already noted in the last chapter how the Buddha explicitly warned his disciples against the tendency to take his assertions, including his most profound teaching on dependent arising, as universal truths. His disciples were never fully content in resting with this view, however. Prior to his death, the Buddha's followers were confused about the meaning of his teachings and about not having a spiritual leader for the Sangha. When his favorite disciple, Ananda, one day relayed these fears to the Buddha, he responded by saying:

> Ananda, what does the order of the Sangha expect from me? I have taught the Dhamma without making any distinction as exoteric and esoteric. With regard to the truth, the Tathagata has nothing like the closed fist of a teacher. Surely, Ananda, if there is anyone who thinks that he will lead the Sangha, and that the Sangha should depend on him, let him set down his instructions. But the Tathagata has no such idea. Why should he then leave instructions concerning the Sangha?...Therefore, Ananda, dwell making yourselves your island (support), making yourselves, not anyone else, your refuge.[1]

The Buddha's parting advice to his disciples suggests his disappointment with them: they are still waiting for him to express some mysterious "truth" about the world, and expecting him to lay down explicit criteria on how to run the Sangha. They sense that he has not revealed what is fundamental to their own lives and experiences, and demand some secret, esoteric truth which he has not yet told them. The Buddha's frustration is evident and understandable: he says that he has not held anything back, that he has no mysterious truth about the nature of reality, and no preestablished rules which should be adopted by

everyone universally. It seems as if they had not really heard his teachings at all, in fact, and he expresses his disappointment by saying, "what do they expect from me?"

Nevertheless, the disciples quickly organized themselves into a community and, shortly after the Buddha's death, assembled for what is called the First Council to recite and organize the Buddha's teachings. To help memorize the teachings, the monks separated those teachings dealing with important doctrines and expressed in story or discourse form, called *sutras*, from those teachings that dealt mainly with precepts and rules of the monastic life, called *vinaya*. Given the fact that great stress was put on living the monastic life, it is not surprising that the Vinaya-pitaka, or "Basket of Rules" as it was later called, was the object of careful scrutiny and debate. Living according to the precepts included in the *vinaya* was what distinguished a monk from a lay-person, and it was thus necessary to have a correct understanding of the *vinaya* if the monks wished to live according to true Buddhist practices.

A hundred years after the Buddha's death, however, a schism arose in the Buddhist order over the *vinaya*. Some monks were found violating certain rules, such as drinking intoxicating beverages, accepting gold and silver, taking food at the wrong time of day, and holding views of the sort which said that an *arhat* may be sexually tempted, or that he might attain enlightenment through the help of others, and so forth.[2] The Second Council was organized to debate these matters, but instead of resolving it the schism was deepened, and eventually led to two distinct orders or sects: the Mahasanghika (or "Great Assembly") who argued for the liberalization of the Buddhist precepts, and the Sthaviravada (or "the monks of the Great Council") who advocated a strict adherence to the rules and precepts. The liberal Mahasanghika school later underwent nine more schisms, and eventually led to the development of the Mahayana tradition, while the conservative Sthaviravada lineage divided into eleven different schools, collectively referred to as Nikaya, or "monastic"

Buddhism. The original schism thus quickly branched off into a total of eighteen different sects.[3]

Nikaya Buddhism and the Development of the Abhidharma

Nikaya Buddhism refers to the scholarly and monastic form of Buddhism that developed after the initial schism of the Second Council. Nikaya Buddhism was generally secluded within monasteries, and taught that in order to strictly observe the precepts and perform religious practices one had to be free both from society and from the obligations associated with a household lifestyle. This sharp division between monastic and lay life which is characteristic of early Nikaya Buddhism signified an exclusive approach to liberation: an arhat's job was not to help others but to strive for individual perfection and to eliminate one's own defilements. It was this sole concern for individual salvation that led the Mahayana Buddhists to degrade Nikaya Buddhism as an inferior, or "Hinayana" teaching.

Nevertheless, an isolated and cloistered life has its benefits, as it allowed the Nikaya Buddhists to devote themselves to intense philosophical activity and a detailed analysis of the Dharma. Kenneth Inada, a famous Madhyamika scholar, says that this period signifies a great achievement in Buddhist history. It was, as he says,

> the most active, highly vibrant and competitive age in Buddhist history . . . If there are high watermarks to be considered in Buddhist history, (this) period certainly rates a very high level, a level of great fermentation and flourishment of Buddhist thought. Ideologically speaking, no other period in Buddhist history . . . could ever match, or come up to the level of activity as recorded during this period.[4]

The literature that developed out of this scholastic form of Buddhism is called the *abhidharma*, meaning "the study of the dharma." While organizing the Buddha's

discourses into the *Suttra-pitaka*, and the monastic rules into the *Vinaya-pitaka*, the Nikaya scholars also felt a need to develop a detailed classification of all the basic doctrines scattered throughout the discourses. This process of classifying and listing the main "topics" (*matika*) on which the Buddha discoursed soon became an object of commentarial and scholastic study itself, and were eventually compiled into a collection called the *Abhidharma-pitaka*, which makes up the "Three Baskets" or *Tripitaka* of the early Buddhist canon.

In the process of selecting and organizing the Buddha's basic teachings, however, there also occurred a radical conceptual shift that is important for this study. Many Nikaya schools, such as the important Sarvastivadin tradition, reinterpreted Buddhist doctrine in such a way that the idea of the Buddha's teachings being "rafts" or "skilful means" was virtually drained of all significance. The use of parables, similes, anecdotes, and narrative tales were abandoned in favor of a nondiscursive, dry, and impersonal method of analysis. The Abhidharmists made a distinction between the discourses (*sutta*) of the Buddha and the scholastic treatises (*abhidhamma*), and labeled the former as mere "conventional" teachings while the latter came to signify "Ultimate Truth" (*paramattha*). According to one Abhidharma scholar, N. Mahathera, the difference between the discourses of the Buddha and the *abhidharma* consists in the fact that,

> in the Sutta the doctrines are more or less explained in the words of the philosophically incorrect 'conventional' every-day language understood by anyone, whilst the Abhidhamma, on the other hand, makes use of purely philosophical terms true in the absolute sense.[5]

This distinction between the "conventional" teachings versus those which are "ultimately" true signifies the complete separation of what could be considered the literary "style" of the Buddha's teachings from its content, and points to a philosophical distinction

between, on the one hand, conventional expression used in an every-day sense, and, on the other hand, a pure philosophical truth standing behind such expressions. Thus, even though the Buddha uses analogies, metaphors, and narrative devices, the Abhidharma thinkers saw this as a mere "convention" and probed deeper into the Buddha's discourses to unearth a deeper "truth." Paul Griffiths explains this by saying that the Abhidharma tradition relied on a distinction between an "everyday discourse" and a "dharma discourse," and says that while the former refers to the everyday use of words such as "self," "me," "I," "tree," "chariot" and so forth--and the latter refers to a discourse which underlies such terms--a discourse which seeks to descend from the general to the particular, or from the abstract wholes which we refer to on an "everyday" level to the bare constituents which make them up.[6] The term "self" and "chariot" for example, don't refer to anything in particular, because they are constituted by other, more particular things, such as a body, emotions, and dispositions on the one hand, or wheels, poles, and axles on the other. Therefore, even though the Buddha used terms such as "self" and "chariot" he did so only as a matter of convenience, because underlying these terms are the ultimate constituents of reality, the *dharmas*, which come together through laws of causation to construct the furniture of our everyday world.

The Abhidharma Buddhists said that the Buddha's enlightenment experience consisted in attaining knowledge of *dharmas*.[7] He penetrated beyond the "conventional" realm and into a "*dharma*" realm, and realized that all living things are composed of elementary *dharmas*, and that apart from these there is no "self," substance, or ego. The Abhidharma tradition thus accepted the doctrine of *anatman* as a basic ontological truth, and said that one needed to understand the theory of *dharmas* in order to attain liberation. Moreover, understanding this theory of *dharmas* entails more than simply "mapping out" their nature--one also needed to have a firm grasp on how they are related, how they

condition other *dharmas*, and how they arise and disappear, i.e., one needed to understand their causal relationships.

Liberation for the Abhidharmists consists in progressive stage in which one first of all "gets dharmas into view," i.e., breaks up the apparent unity of individuals, things, and objects into their distinct *dharmic* elements. Next, one must "depersonalize" and eliminate any reference to an "I," "me" or "mine"--only the *dharmas* exist, without an agent or unified "self" standing behind or above the flow of *dharmas*. The final stage is obviously the most difficult, since it means stopping the "influx" of all conditioned *dharmas*: i.e., detaching oneself completely from the causal nexus of *dharmas* so that their "force" no longer "contaminates" experience. To enter this final stage, one must acquire a special form of knowledge, an insight (*prajna*) that interrupts the flow of *dharmas*.

The Abhidharma task was to clarify these points by elucidating the bare phenomenal world through pure description and analysis. This philosophical project was considered more "true" since it spoke of the underlying constituents of all things, their manner of arising and passing away, and their causal interactions. In fact, as the great Abhidharma commentator, Vasubandhu, says, the literature of the *abhidharma* is itself the revelation of wisdom and absolute truth: "The Abhidharma is called *abhi-dharma* because it envisions the *dharma*, Nirvana."[8] Or as Buddhaghosa says, the *abhidharma* is "the instruction in the ultimate nature of things." The Abhidharma analysis of experience thus signified the path to pure wisdom, and is why it was said that the Buddha taught the *abhidharma* not to ordinary human beings--but to the gods.

That the Buddha's teachings were "rafts, for crossing over, not for retaining," was replaced by a detailed analysis of reality which sought to discover the discrete facts of existence; and this new understanding was then supported by saying that one needed to

"review" the ontological status of *dharmas*, to see reality as it really is, before one could achieve liberation. Vasubandhu makes this clear in the following paragraph:

> Because there is no means of pacifying the passions without close investigation of existents, and because it is the passions that cause the world to wander in this great ocean of transmigration, therefore they say that the teacher--which means the Buddha--spoke this metaphysical system aimed at the close examination of existents. For a student is not able to closely investigate existents without teaching in metaphysics.[9]

In this passage, Vasubhandu not only offers strong support for a metaphysical explanation of reality, but insists that one needs this metaphysic in order to attain liberation. The pedagogical style of the Buddha--his "skilful means"--is considered soteriologically insignificant because what matters in terms of liberation is not *how* one addresses other sentient beings--but *what* these sentient beings must know in order to be helped: i.e., "a close examination of existents." We will see later how Nagarjuna attack this position as "bad medicine" because it assumes that everyone suffers from the same "disease" and that a single "medicine"--in this case, a "metaphysic"-- will cure all. Nagarjuna's attack goes directly to the heart of the Abhidharma analysis, focusing both on the *dharmas* and the causal relations which are supposed to hold them together.

The Abhidharma Analysis of *Dharmas*

Although the Sarvastavadin school argues that the *abhidharma* analysis of experience was directly taught by the Buddha, it is more likely a continuation and development of certain key teachings found in the discourses. Primarily in reaction to the prevailing Hindu notion of an indestructible and eternal soul, or *Atman*, for example, the Buddha taught his doctrine of *anatman*, or non-self, which was an attempt to counteract the

incessant quest for some deep, hidden, and mysteriously transcendent "Self." According to the *anatman* teaching, when we critically analyze our experiences we do not find anything stable or unchanging. Our experiences are instead made up of a whole series of inter-woven and ever-changing psycho-physical forces, or aggregates (*skandhas*), with no underlying substance (*atman*) or unifying essence. The Buddha taught that there are five such *skandhas*, including material forms (*rupa*), sensations (*samskara*), perceptions (*samjna*), mental formations (*samskara*), and consciousness (*vijnana*), which supposedly covers all mental and physical experience, and excludes any underlying "self" or substance. The *Visuddhi-Magga* (chap. xiv.) explains the reason why there are five *skandhas*:

> Why did The Blessed One say there were five groups, no less and no more?
>
> Because these sum up and classify, according to their affinities, all the constituents of being; because it is only these that can afford a basis for the figment of a Self or of anything related to a Self; and because these include all other classifications.
>
> For in classifying, according to their affinities, the many different constituents of being, form constitutes one group, and comprises everything that has any affinity to form; sensation constitutes another group, and comprises everything that has any affinity to sensation. Similarly with respect to perception and the rest. Accordingly he laid down only five groups, because these sum up and classify, according to their affinities, all the constituents of being.[10]

According to the Abhidharma view of *anatman*, the idea of an unchanging substance or "self" is nothing but a projection onto an interdependent flux of experience. The *skandhas* which make up the personality are said to be impermanent (*anitya*), and any attempt to grasp some part of it, such as consciousness, or search for some entity or substance independent of it, such as a soul, was said to be the main cause of suffering in life (*duhkha*). It was thus vital in early Buddhism to uproot a fictitious sense of self, and that is why early Buddhist texts are full of statements such as: "A particular thing is not

one's Self (when it can be said that) this thing is not mine (*mama*), I am not this thing, or this thing is not my self."[11] A Buddhist practitioner is thus asked to be forever vigilant against attributing a "self" to any aspect of experience, always mindful of the simple flow of phenomena that rise and fall like an "empty" stream.

The *abhidharma* literature was created in part to aid this meditative process. It analyzed the *skandhas* into finer and more detailed pictures, creating ever more subtle distinctions into a tight web of "matrixes" for the purpose of sorting out, and being able to quickly recognize, the complex phenomenal threads involved in any experience. Thus, for example, the five *skandhas* can easily be broken down and divided into a more accurate account of the different types of feelings that accompany a sensation, or the different types of colors or sounds involved in particular perceptual event, or the different kinds of ideas that take place in an act of conscious awareness. These different types of experience were labeled *dharmas*, or elements of existence, and are what make up the phenomenal world. As Hirakawa explains it:

> The five aggregates of which a person is composed (form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness) are considered to be *dharmas*. However, the aggregates of form (*rupa*) and mental phenomena (*samskara*) can be further classified and subdivided into additional *dharmas*. *Rupa* refers to both the body and material objects. For the body, five *dharmas* referring to the five senses are listed: eye, ear, nose, tongue and body...The material of the external world is also divided into five categories that are the objects of sense perception: forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and tangible objects. Here, *rupa* refers to visual objects, things with form and color. Such objects of vision are further divided into categories of color such as blue, yellow, red, and white. Each of these elements exists as a *dharma*. Sounds, smells, tastes, and tangible objects are also analyzed further into basic units.[12]

However, the *dharmas* are not unchanging or eternal: they are impermanent, and rise and fall through the process of dependent origination (*pratityasamut-panna-dharma*). This practice of dividing and analyzing experience into a finely knit grid of *dharmas* thus

aids the Buddhist practitioner in the ability to identify and hence reflect upon the causal flow of experience. For someone struck by emotional pain, for example, the *dharma* theory is supposed to soften its effect. By labeling that emotion as a *dharma* of "pain" the person is supposed to realize that, like all *dharmas* of this type, it is conditioned by other *dharmas*, such as those dealing with memories, mental formations, physiological sensations, and so forth, and because it is *dharma* it is also impermanent, and thus no need to dwell on it. Seeing it as both "conditioned" and "impermanent" is the direct result of labeling it a *dharma*, and is supposed to act as a barrier against positing it in a fixed or substantial way. One can simply "watch" it rise and fall without being attached to it in a consuming manner. All mental and physical experiences are to be viewed in this manner, and any reification of a false sense of "self" supposedly dissolves away into currents of sensations, impressions, feelings, and ideas--with no underlying substrate, and hence no "thing" which could be an object of attachment.

As a meditation tool, it is clear how much the *abhidharma* literature resembles the Buddha's view that all his teachings are "rafts" for overcoming attachments. The analytical technique which is so characteristic of this segment of the Buddhist canon is supposed to serve as a guide for understanding one's experiences in a structured way so that the idea of an independent "self" dissolves into an interdependent network of psycho-physical forces. According to the Tibetan scholar Herbert Guenther who see the practical approach in the *abhidharma* texts,

> The *abhidharma*, however dry its presentation in a highly technical language may appear to us at first sight, aims at nothing less than to open man's eyes to that which is not speculatively arrived at by the logical method of hypothesis and deductive verification, but which can be immediately apprehended and is applicable to ourselves.[13]

Likewise, in a series of lectures contained in the book, *Glimpses of the Abhidharma*, the Tibetan Scholar, Chogyam Trungpa, says the following regarding the *abhidharma*:

> It is helpful not only for pure meditation but also meditation in action. The whole approach of Buddhism is oriented towards dealing with everyday life situations...(it is) concerned with how to step out of our usual sleepwalking and deal really with actual situations. The abhidharma is a very important part of that general instruction.[14]

The dominant trend in scholastic Nikaya Buddhism saw it differently, however. Even though the *abhidharma* literature was first constructed as another "skilful means" to help meditative practice, it soon overcame this "lower" status as a mere "skillful mean" and was transformed into treatises on the ultimate nature of reality. The Abhidharma distinction between "absolute" and "conventional" is their justification for this view. For example, in the Pali Nikayas and the Chinese Agamas there is a famous passage which denies the idea of "Self" through the analogy of a chariot and its parts.

> Just as the word "chariot" is but a mode of expression for axle, wheels, chariot-body, pole, and other constituent members, placed in a certain relation to each other, but when we come to examine the members one by one, we discover that in the absolute sense there is no chariot...in exactly the same way the words "living entity" and "Self" are but a mode of expression for the presence of the five attachment groups, but when we come to examine the elements of being one by one, we discover that in the absolute sense there is no living entity there to form a basis for such figments as "I am," or "I"; in other words, that in the absolute sense there is only name and form. The insight of him who perceives this is called knowledge of the truth.[15]

The Abhidharma interpretation of such passages is to see an ontological distinction between our everyday use of words, such as "chariot," "self", "I," and "me," versus an underlying reality which these words obscure. Thus, even though there is no "self" or

fixed entity in the absolute sense, the parts that make up that conventional world are, for the Abhidharma scholars, "ultimately" real, and therefore have an ontological status independent of the way we speak of them "conventionally." One of the first Western Abhidharma scholars, Stcherbatsky, puts it in the following way:

> The term *anatman* is usually translated as 'non-soul,' but in reality *atman* is here synonymous with a personality, an ego, a self, an individual, a living being, a conscious agent, etc. The underlying idea is that, whatsoever be designated by all these names is not a real and ultimate fact, it is a mere name for a multitude of interconnected facts, which Buddhist philosophy is attempting to analyze by reducing them to real elements (*dharma*).[16]

This attempt to ontologize the *abhidharma* texts was justified by asserting not only that it was what the Buddha had said all along, but that the metaphysical picture these texts present was the only accurate depiction of reality, and that it would therefore be impossible to achieve salvation (Nirvana) without "seeing" reality as these texts describe it: in other words, as composed of nothing but *dharmas*. As Paul Griffiths puts it,

> The result of a consistent and determined effort to internalize the categories of Buddhist thought by way of the practice of analytic meditation is, it is said, identical with the removal of ignorance, the attainment of knowledge, and the development of the ability to perceive things as they really are. When this accurate knowledge and clear perception is continuously possessed by the practitioner, the root cause of bondage is removed and salvation attained.[17]

Getting the metaphysical picture of the *dharmas* straight became the central preoccupation with the Abhidharma scholars. Mindfulness, or *smrti*, consisted in "getting *dharmas* into view," in other words, of isolating them within experience and "burning" them up.

The process of "burning" *dharmas* is of course central, because the majority of *dharmas* are "defiled"--that is, they are the cause of bondage and suffering, and they enter

into the stream of mental experience and "contaminate" it with anger, lust, hatred, envy, and so forth. Perfect knowledge of the *dhamma*, of the Four Noble Truths, *anatman*, impermanence, and so forth, "burned" up whatever "defiled" *dharmas* existed in one's experience, and stopped the "influx" of any further *dharmas*.

This practice of meditative "discernment" no doubt requires skill, since it involves seeing the world in a new way, and means moving from the conventional, everyday manner of seeing things to the underlying bare realities of existence. The skill that is spoken of in this context, however, is quite different from the Buddha's conception of skill as "rafts." Whereas the Buddha used it without any commitment to an ontology, the Abhidharma thinkers shifted its meaning into a vehicle for discovering reality, and insisted that this was the only possible "device" for achieving enlightenment. Not only were the Buddha's teachings interpreted as truthful propositions, but the *dharma* theory which he outlined was a necessary condition for enlightenment.

The Self-Nature of *Dharmas*

How did the Abhidharma scholars justify this view of reality? First, as already explained in an earlier reference to Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakosabhasya*, they made a distinction between two realms of being: a conventional existence (*samvrti-sat*) which included the combination of *dharmas* that make up our everyday life, and an ultimate existence (*paramartha-sat*), which is the bare reality of *dharmas* as they exist in and of themselves. Secondly, they asserted that in an absolute sense each *dharma* has its own distinctive nature (*svabhava*) which separates it and distinguishes it from every other *dharma*. Thus, the ultimate nature of a *dharma*, its *svabhava*, is discovered upon the division of all those elements which make up our "conventional" world, and has its own

definable characteristic which separates it from all other *dharmas*. Hirakawa illustrates this point with the example of an ordinary vase:

> A vase can be destroyed by smashing it and is therefore said to exist in a conventional sense. A piece of cloth would be classified in the same manner. A human being, a conglomeration of various physical and mental elements, exists in a conventional sense. However, if the vase had been green, then that green color would continue to exist even though the vase had been smashed. Even if the vase were reduced to the smallest elements, to atoms, the green color would still exist. Items that do not depend on other items for their existence, which exist in and of themselves (or have *svabhava*) are said to be ultimately existent and are called *dharmas*....Any element that cannot be analyzed further is ultimately existent. It is a *dharma* and has its own self-nature (*sa-svabhava*). It is a real existent.[18]

As noted previously, however, saying that *dharmas* are substantially real does not mean that they are eternal and unchanging. Generally, *dharmas* are said to be impermanent or momentary (*anitya*): they arise and cease each moment through the law of "dependent arising." According to Vasubandhu,

> Conditioned *dharmas* cease each instant...They are *dharmas* because they each have their own characteristic and maintain it for an appropriate length of time.[19]

Part of the reason why it is so difficult to "get the *dharmas* into view" is because of this momentary status, for in spite of their actual existence they nevertheless arise and cease like flashes in a space-time continuum: although real and substantial, they do not last.

A similar Abhidharmic view of reality is echoed by Bertrand Russell in his book, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*:

> There had been a metaphysical prejudice always that if a thing is really real, it has to last either forever or for a fairly decent length of time. That to my mind is an entire mistake. The things that are really real last a very short time. Again I am not denying that there may be things that last forever, or for thousands of years; I only say that those are not within our experience, and that the real things we know by

> experience last for a very short time, one tenth or half a second, or whatever it may be.[20]

In a manner similar to Russell, the Abhidharma thinkers said that the "real things" of experience are impermanent substances, and not, as we might like to think, the more lasting objects found in our everyday world. Where the Abhidharma thinkers would differ from Russell, however, is in their claim that at least some *dharmas* escape this process. For example, in the Theravada tradition there is one unconditioned *dharma*, Nirvana; for the Sarvastavadins "space" and "Nirvana" are both unconditioned *dharmas*; while other traditions held that along with space and Nirvana, the law of "Dependent Arising" was itself an unchanging dharmic principle.[21] Thus, even though most *dharmas* are conditioned and function within the laws of causality, some very important ones can be found outside these laws.

The reason for thinking that certain *dharmas*, like *nirvana*, are unconditioned has to do with the generally negative attitude which most Abhidharma traditions had against anything conditioned or impermanent. As Vasubandhu says,

> Conditioned *dharmas*, with the exception of the Path, are impure. With the exception of the Path, all conditioned *dharmas* are defiled."[22]

In other words, whatever is impermanent (*anitya*) is itself adverse or painful (*duhkha*), "not worth rejoicing over nor worth approval nor worth cleaving to," and therefore something to be "abandoned" and transcended. Nirvana, as the ultimate goal, is therefore unconditioned in contrast to all other *dharmas* because it is the "realm" in which all defilements "cease," and is attained through the difficult task of "getting *dharmas* into view," isolating them within experience, and extinguishing them.

Whether conditioned or unconditioned, however, the Abhidharma thinkers were faced with the difficult philosophical problem of trying to explain this *dharmic* ontology. Because the bare realities of existence are temporary and yet independent, there is the deeper puzzle of trying to explain how everything fits together. So, for example, they had to explain how things could be both "real" and impermanent at the same time, or how *dharmas* are able to come together with other *dharmas* to form causal relationships. This is important because of where the doctrine of *anatman* leaves us: that is, given that there is no underlying "self" or substance to reality, and given that experience is only composed of conditioned *dharmas*, how is one able to achieve liberation from the causal nexus? The Hindu theory of the "Self" alleviates this problem by saying that the process of causation is, as Shankara says, "superimposition"--i.e., not part of Reality. Thus, one only needs to realize the apparent and illusory nature of causality to attain *moksha*. For the Abhidharma Buddhists, on the other hand, the *dharmas* are real: they are substances and exist in real causal relationships. Given the real existence of *dharmas*, one cannot therefore attain liberation by saying that one is not really stuck in conditioned existence after all, or that causality is simply *maya*. Rather, one needs to understand the actual, concrete workings of conditioned phenomena, how the "defilements" arise and cease, how they condition other phenomena, and how they can be "abandoned." The issue of causality is thus extremely important for the Abhidharma thinkers, for without understanding the process by which sentient beings become bound--there is no hope for escape.

Dharmas and the Problem of Causality

As noted above, one of the most important characteristics of all conditioned *dharmas* is that they are in a perpetual state of impermanence (*anitya*). This aspect is so

fundamental to almost every Buddhist tradition that it is labeled as one of the "three marks" of all conditioned phenomena. In regards the impermanence of *dharmas*, Stcherbatsky explains it in the following way:

> The elements of existence are momentary appearances, momentary flashings into the phenomenal world out of an unknown source...They disappear as soon as they appear, in order to be followed in the next moment by another momentary existence. Thus a moment becomes a synonym of an element (*dharma*), two moments are two different elements. An element becomes something like a point in time-space...Consequently, the elements do not change, but disappear, the world becomes a cinema. Disappearance is the essence of existence; what does not disappear does not exist.[23]

That all phenomena are impermanent (or momentary) was no doubt one of the Buddha's main teachings and, at least in the early discourses, serves the *upayic* function of helping others experience life without such things as the fear of death or "blind attachment. But when it is taken out of the context of performing as a "skilful means" spoken of ontologically, one is saddled with the basic philosophical dilemma of trying to explain the types of causal connections that adhere between two radically different moments. The need for this explanation, as we saw, stems from the Abhidharmic view that the Buddha's teachings can be divided into "conventional" and "ultimate" truths. Vasubandhu, for instance, asks the following question:

> Why is it that the twelve members of interconnected origination of the elements are differently treated in the Scripture (*Sutra*) and in the Exegesis (*Abhidharma*)? e.g. it is stated in the latter that the interconnected origination of elements (*pratitya-samutpada*) is a term equivalent to all the active elements.

And he answers:

> Because in the sutras this relation is treated intentionally (in a popular way), whereas the exegetical works explain its essence (in regard to all elements in general.)[24]

This division is what spurred the Abhidharma analysis of experience into independent and definable substances, but it also led to deeper problems regarding causality. If all *dharmas* are momentary units of experience, as the Abhidharma thinkers hold, then how are we supposed to explain the relationship between one *dharmic* moment and the next? The Vedanta philosopher, Sankara, expressed this problem in the following way:

> Those who maintain that everything has a momentary existence only admit that when the thing existing in the second moment enters into being, the thing existing in the first moment ceases to be. On this admission, it is impossible to establish between the two things the relation of cause and effect, since the former momentary existence ceases or has ceased to be, and so has entered into the state of non-existence, cannot be the cause of the later momentary existence."[25]

The Abhidharma Buddhists were also aware of this problem long before Sankara, and they tried to remedy it by adopting different causal theories to account for the continuity of *dharmas*. The Sarvastivadins, for example, distinguished between the substance of a *dharma*, its *svabhava* or self-nature, which remained the same throughout time, and its causal properties that actually underwent change. The Sautantrika and Theravada traditions, on the other hand, formulated theories of which Kalupahana calls, "immediate contiguity" which deny an underlying substance by locating causal efficiency of a *dharma* in its immediate predecessor.

These different theories of causality have serious soteriological implications for the Abhidharma thinkers. They are not simply trying to quench their "philosophical" curiosity

about the nature of the world, but are seeking liberation from *dharmic* world. The relationship between those *dharmas* which are "defiled" and those which are "undefiled," for example, is a soteriological problem for the Abhidharma because it raises the question on how one can ever attain an unconditioned *dharma* (i.e., Nirvana) while rooted in a causal world of "defilements."

As we will see in later chapters, however, both attempts to unite the *dharmas* in any type of causal relationship was severely criticized by Nagarjuna who called into question the entire metaphysical world-view of the Abhidharma philosophers. Before we address this criticism, however, we should examine in more depth the ways in which different Abhidharma traditions tried to solve this problem regarding the causation of *dharmas*. The following is brief overview of the Sarvastivadin and Sautrantikan approach to this issue.

Causality in the Sarvastivadin Tradition

In attempting to reconcile the theory of *dharmas* with the doctrines of impermanence, the Sarvastivadin philosophers adopted theories of causation which closely resemble those of the Samkhya tradition. According to the Samkhya philosopher, Ishvarakrishna, there is no difference whatsoever between a cause and effect since both are pervaded with the same primordial "stuff" or substance, *prakrti*. The changes that take place in the world are nothing but the unfolding of this self-same substance which is in essence unmanifested *prakrti*. Thus, though the characteristics of *prakrti* undergo changes and exist within causal relationships, there is a complete identity between causes and effects since underlying them, or uniting them, is this metaphysical substance. As Ishavarakrshna, says:

> The qualities of Nature have an unmanifested entity for their cause (i.e., they have a cause in which they exist in their unmanifested state),--because they are finite,--like

> the jar and other things:--the jar and other things are found to have, for their cause, clay and other things, in which inhere the unmanifested state of the effects.[26]

The Sarvastivadin philosophers made a similar distinction between the substance of a thing and its characteristic, and stated that even though a *dharma's* characteristics change, its intrinsic nature (*svabhava*) remains the same throughout time. Like the Samkhya tradition they said that there is no fundamental difference between a cause and effect, which is why they gave themselves the title "everything exists" or "Sarvastivadin," referring to the real existence of a *dharma's* "own nature" through all time periods: past, present, and future. "All elements," says Stcherbatsky, "exist on two different planes, the real essence of the element (*svabhava-dharma*) and its momentary manifestation. The first exists always, in past, present, and future...it represents the potential appearances of the element into phenomenal existence, and its past appearances as well."[27] According to the Sarvastivadins, one only recognizes a *dharma* in its present manifest form, by its "mark" or *laksana*, but its real existence is something timeless, transcendental, a structural a-priori which allows for the continuity between two separate *dharmas*. And though its manifestation is subject to the forces of production, decay, and destruction, its essence remains the same.

The *Abhidharmakosya* refers to four different theories which the Sarvastivadin philosophers developed to explain this process of causation. The first was formulated by Dharmatrata, who argued that an entity which exists during the three time periods of past, present, and future, changes its state (*bhava*) but not its underlying substance.[28] The second theory was put forth by Ghosaka, who said that only the characteristics of a thing are subject to change, but that it "retains" its aspects from every time period.[29] The third view was advocated by Vasumitra, who taught that the substance of an element remains the same, but as the element passes through the three time periods it changes its condition and

thus receives different designations depending on the condition it has reached.[30] The final view advocated by a Sarvastavadin philosopher was put forth by Buddhadeva, who said that a thing changes because of the change of its relation with things past, present, and future.[31]

Not all of the above four theories were readily accepted by every Sarvastivadin, as Vasubandhu notes that the third, which advocates a change in condition but not in substance, seems to have been the most popular and widely accepted by the Sarvastavadin tradition as a whole. Nevertheless, all four theories share the same basic assumption that a *dharma* can be divided into "two spheres," one part which exists in time and connects with other manifested *dharmas*, and the other part which is unchanging, everlasting, and substantially distinct. Underlying the causal process, which is but a "conventional" designation for fleeting appearances, is the self-same substance that pervades all periods of time. For this reason, the Sarvastivadins also referred to themselves as "Substantialists" and is why they asserted that the past and future, as well as the present, exist as substantially real entities.

The motivation behind this "substantialistic" account of *dharmas* is an attempt to account for the continuity of "defiled" *dharmas*. Even though *dharmas* are supposedly impermanent, it was obvious to the Sarvastivadin philosophers that "past" *dharmas* influence or "contaminate" present experience, such that past "anger," "lust" and "ignorance," for example, conditions present experience in such a way that they continue in the future. "Defiled" *dharmas*, in other words, sets the stage for action(*karma*), and these actions are then repeated--or "reborn"--throughout the three time periods. *dharmas* are therefore a highly complicated and dangerous affair for the Sarvastivadin thinkers: complicated because it has this dual aspect of going through change and yet remaining the same, but dangerous because the its substantive element--its "self-nature"--continues

through experience making it impossible to "burn up" and destroy. The continuity of *dharmas* is so substantial and real that the struggle for liberation seems almost hopeless, for once the stream of experience is "contaminated," it continues without halt.

For this reason, the Sarvastivadins said that only knowledge of that which is unconditioned (*Nirvana*) will allow for liberation. Because "defiled" *dharmas* continue without ever ceasing--there is no way to halt their activity. Thus, the only way to be liberated from them is attain a type of knowledge which "interrupts" the causal process and allows one to be "possess" a pure *dharama*: i.e., allows one to achieve a state in which no causal activity takes place. A "pure" *dharma* such as *Nirvana* is unconditioned, it is not caused or produced, and exists independently from the causal activity of our "everyday" world--and to know this *dharma*, to realize it and experience it, is to disrupt the causal process such that the "defiled" *dharmas* no longer affect one's life stream. Personal identity is then completely "interrupted"--and one is longer bound to conditioned world in which "defiled" *dharmas* repeat themselves without halt.

Causality in the Sautrantika Tradition

The Sautrantika philosophers rejected the Sarvastivadin conception of *svabhava* on the grounds that it contradicts the basic tenet of the *anatman* doctrine by positing an eternal substance, a position which the Buddha had long ago denied. They likewise found the division of *dharmas* into substance and properties an absurd distinction which only confuses the ability to explain the process of impermanence.

> They cannot explain the origination and decay (which are going on in the process of life). An element, according to this view, is permanent and impermanent at the same time. This indeed, is something quite new![32]

The Sautrantika philosophers took a relatively common-sense approach in their criticisms of the Sarvastivadins. To say that the past, present, and future "exist" in a substantial or objective manner was not only to confuse the three time periods, but, even worse, it leads to not being able to make sense of our everyday understanding of these terms.

> If they are always existent, how is the (remarkable result) brought about that they are called past or future? Therefore, the words of our Sublime Lord, "there *is* a past, there *is* a future," must be understood in another sense. He proffered them when discussing with the Ajivikas (who denied moral responsibility for past deeds). He strongly opposed their doctrine, which denied the connexion between a past cause and a future result. In order to make it known that a former cause and a future are something which happened formerly and will happen in the future, he categorically declared: "There *is* a past, there *is* a future." For the word "is" acts as a particle (which may refer to something existent and to non-existent as well). As e.g. people will say: "there *is* absence of light (before it has been kindled), "there *is* absence of light (it has been put out)," or the "light *is* put out, but I did not put it out." When Buddha declared that there "is" a past and there "is" a future, he used the word "is" in that sense. Had it been otherwise, it would be absolutely impossible to account for (the notions of) a past and a future.[33]

Though the Sautrantika denied the idea of *svabhava* as simply another form of *atman*, they nevertheless accepted the theory of moments common to all the Abhidharma traditions, and were thus faced with the same dilemma of explaining the continuity between two *dharmic* moments. They did this in two ways: first, they denied that the past or future exist in any ontological manner, asserting that it is only the present moment exists; and second, they said that what exists presently is but the "coming into existence" of what was non-existent and the "going out of existence" of that which does exist. In other words, all things are characterized by birth and death in such a way that what is born comes out of nothing and what dies goes into nothing. Rather than developing from its "own nature" as in the Sarvastavadin tradition, the Sautrantikas argue that a *dharma* is but a "continuous flow" in a whole series of successive moments. Thus, what appears static, or what seems

like a change of a single substance, is in fact the continual creation of new *dharmas*--and their immediate destruction. As Vasubandhu explains it,

> When the organ of vision (eye) is produced, it does not come from some other place; when it disappears it is not going to be stored up in another place. (Consequently) a thing becomes, having not been before; having become, it ceases to be[34]

It is not clear how these "momentary flashings" are connected causally, or how, for example, a *dharmic* moment can come into being from a "state" of non-existence. The exact nature of causality is thus left unexplained, and they seem to have brushed over this gap with statements similar to the Sarvastivadins who said, "that this is something we do not succeed in explaining, their essence is deep (it is transcendental), since its existence cannot be established by rational methods."[35] Kalupahana tries to explain the Sautrantika position on the causal relation between moments by saying that birth is its beginning of a *dharmic* series, decay the transition into a new *dharma* within the series, and destruction as the final end of the series altogether. The causation of each individual moment, he says, is therefore reduced to "invariable antecedence."[36] It is not clear exactly what this means, and Mookerjee is perhaps right when he says: "From the elaborate exposition of the theory of causation with its confused tangle of criticism and counter criticism...one cannot resist the impression that the Sautrantika has failed, in spite of his logical acumen and wealth of dialectic, to carry any conviction."[37]

Whereas the Sarvastivadins claimed that consciousness presupposes an objective referent, and that both terms of the subject-object relation therefore exist as ontological bits of reality, the Sautrantikas stated that because there is no underlying substance to things, and because *dharmas* are but momentary flashes that die the "moment" they are born, there is therefore no direct perception of reality. What one perceives has already vanished into

non-existence, has already passed by without any static feature that would allow one to grasp it as something permanent. Thus, although the Sarvastivadins assert that it is only the present which exists in any sense, its existence as a "momentary" thing precludes one from apprehending it as a true object of cognition. What appears static or substantial is nothing but a mental "impression" of something which does not exist. The primary goal of philosophical insight is thus an awareness that one should not be attached to a mere "impression" since what it represents in the world has already vanished.

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the Abhidharma tradition of Nikaya Buddhism offers a unique metaphysical view of the world. In stark contrast to the Vedanta, as well as the Western Platonic traditions, Abhidharma Buddhism asks us to *descend* from a conventional and nominalistic world where we refer to things in a general sense to an "ultimate" world populated with distinct, particular entities. Truth is not found in universals, nor attained through a dialectical progression that leads to more general sets of categories, ideas, and principles. Rather, existence is composed of a plurality of separate elements, held together by laws of causation, and discovered through a process of meditative analysis which moves from general statements to discreet "facts."

What is interesting in this "radical pluralism" as Stcherbatsky calls it, however, is that one is called upon to negate most of what is discovered to exist in an absolute sense. In other words, after having discovered that the truth of the world is nothing but a collection of *dharmas*, one must nevertheless keep moving from what ultimately exists conditionally, to what ultimately exists *unconditionally*: Nirvana. What is revealed upon analysis is that conventional terms such as "I," "me," "desk," "chariot" and so forth have no objective referent, and are instead composed of conditioned *dharmas* which provide the basis for

knowledge and experience. But one must not rest with this "truth," however, for even though conditioned *dharmas* are "ultimately" real, they must be "appeased" and "extinguished" before achieving Nirvana. The leap into the unconditioned (Nirvana), though no less real than any other *dharma*, is of course the final goal, and is achieved through a type of epistemological shift from simply "reviewing the *dharmas*" to the complete cessation of all conditionedness through a trance-like wisdom.[38]

As noted above, however, liberation cannot be realized without first understanding the metaphysics of *dharmas* and their causal connections. Although the Abhidharma schools may have conceptualized the nature of *dharmas* differently, debated over how many there really are, or argued as to what types of causal relations could adhere between them, they all nevertheless assumed that liberation is contingent upon the correct understanding of reality. "Apart from the discernment of the *dharmas*," says Vasubandhu, "there does not exist any means for the extinguishing of defilements." With this in mind, it is evident why the Abhidharma philosophers emphasized the need to know reality, since without *knowing* what reality is composed of, and how existence becomes "defiled" through causal conditioning, then one is left to "wander in the great ocean of transmigration." The Buddha's statement that "all conditioned things are impermanent" was therefore viewed not simply as a soteriological device or "skilful means" for the purpose of helping others become less attached. Rather, it was viewed in a propositional way, as saying something truthful about the world. The result was a *dharmic* ontology in which simple words stand in a logical relationship with atomic bits of experience.

There is more that accompanies the loss of "skilful means" as a guiding principle than just this, however. At the beginning of this chapter I made a distinction between a "theoretical" approach to the Dharma and an "*upayic*" approach, and said that the Abhidharma tradition adopts the former. What makes their approach "theoretical" is their

belief that the Buddha was committed to a certain ontology, and their view that liberation is contingent upon knowing what the world is like or how it is structured. Their energy was thus put into the service of "mapping" out the complexities of existence, on accessing a *dharmic* world-view, and on knowing how all things are causally interrelated. It is "theoretical" because this picture precedes all else, i.e., the ontology, and the epistemological requirement that goes along with it, is positioned in front of liberation, in fact determines what liberation really is, and thus lowers the status of ethical engagement. When "theory" and "truth" are put above practice, as it is in the Abhidharma tradition, one must wait for the "theory" to become accurate before one can help others. This is so because the "theory" is necessary for liberation: it must be known and experienced as "true" before one can help others experience the *nirvana*. The result is an overly intellectual enterprise in which individual cultivation precedes others.

It is thus not surprising that the Abhidharma tradition as a whole emphasized an individualistic conception of salvation at the expense of helping others. As Hirakawa notes,

> According to Sarvasitvadin and Theravadin doctrine, the goal of practice was to attain salvation for oneself by cutting off all defilements. Once salvation had been attained, the practitioner had accomplished all that was to be done and entered *nirvana*. Saving others was not a necessary requirement for the completion of practice. Even after enlightenment had been attained, helping others was not required...This lack of social concern is probably related to the understanding of the doctrine of Dependent Origination professed by many of the schools of Nikaya Buddhism. For them, Dependent Origination referred to the interaction of discrete entities, each with its own nature.[39]

The *upayic* approach is different in that it begins with others. Its lack of commitment to "truth" is partly what enables it to function in a radically pluralistic way, since its goal is intimately connected to the lives of those who need help. The methodology of "skilful means" is not a theoretical "map," it establishes no guidelines independent from

the contextual needs and dispositions of others, and does rely on a fixed a "path" to liberation. More specifically, the techniques and methods expressed by the word "*upaya*" are not ways to access a "truth" about the world; rather, they are different ways of helping individuals. To view the Buddha's teachings as methodological "rafts" instead of "theories" means to see them as heuristic devices, as words expressed with a certain audience in mind, and not universal propositions that have validity apart from this. It means that these specific teachings, be they *anatman*, dependent arising, or *nirvana*, were given to a specific group of people for the purpose of curing a specific "disease."

It is this very issue of philosophical style that makes the Mahayana critique of scholastic Buddhism so important. Beginning around 100 BCE, the Mahayana tradition came into full bloom with a massive array of philosophical texts and scriptures which directly challenged the interpretive ground of the Abhidharma. Though much of the debate between these two traditions takes place over doctrinal issues and matters of discipline, the fundamental critique which the Mahayana lands against the Abhidharma tradition has to do with the ways in which it separated the Buddha's *style* of teaching from some "higher" truth independent of that style. The *Lotus Sutra*, *Perfection of Insight*, and *Vimalakirti* texts not only attempt to destroy the Scholastic distinction between the *sutras* and the *abhidharma* texts by emphasizing the point that all of the Buddha's teachings, including what he said about Nirvana, dependent arising, and emptiness, are nothing but "skill in means" This stress upon the idea of *upaya* in the Mahayana tradition, as we will see, is also the basis of Nagarjuna's philosophical project.

NOTES

[1] *Mahaparinibbana-sutta*, Walpola Rahula, trans., *What the Buddha Taught*, (Grove Press, inc., New York, 1974) p. 61.

[2] Hirakawa Akira, *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Sakyamuni to Early Mahayana*, Paul Groner, trans., (University of Hawaii Press, 1990), p. 82.

[3] For a detailed discussion of this development, see ibid., p. 69-105.

[4] Kenneth Inada, *Nagarjuna. A Translation of his Mulamadhyamakakarika with an Introductory Essay*, (Tokyo: The Hokuseido Press, 1970), p.3.

[5] Nyanatiloka Mahathera, *Guide Through The Abhidhamma-Pitaka*, (Buddhist Publication Society, 1983), p.2.

[6] Paul J. Griffiths, *On Being Mindless: Buddhist Meditation and the Mind-Body Problem*, (Open Court, 1986), p. 14.

[7] Hirakawa Akira, *A History of Indian Buddhist: From Sakyamuni to Early Mahayana*, Paul Groner, trans., (University of Hawaii Press, 1990), p. 185.

[8] Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakosabhasyam*, Louis de La Vallee Poussin, trans., Leo M Pruden, English trans., (Asian Humanities Press, 1988), p. 57.

[9] Ibid., p. 62

[10] *Visuddhi-Magga* , Henry Clarke Warren, trans., *Buddhism in Translations*, (Harvard University, 1900), p. 156-157.

[11] Hirakawa Akira, A History of Indian Buddhist: From Sakyamuni to Early Mahayana, Paul Groner, trans., (University of Hawaii Press, 1990), p.44.

[12] Ibid., p 47.

[13] Herbert V. Guether, *Philosophy and Psychology in the Abhidharma*, (Shambhala Publications, Inc. 1976), p.3.

[14] Chogyam Trungpa, *Glimpses of Abhidharma: From a Seminar on Buddhist Psychology*, (Prajna Pres, Boulder, 1978), p.3.

[15] *Visuddhi-Magga* (Chap. xviii), Henry Clarke Warren, trans., *Buddhism in Translations*, (Harvard Oriental Series, 1900), p. 133.

[16] Theodore Stcherbatsky, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, (Susil Gupta, India,

Ltd. 1961), p.52.

[17] Paul J. Griffiths, *On Being Mindless: Buddhist Meditation and the mind-body Problem*, (Open Court, 1986.), p. 14.

[18] Hirakawa (1990), p. 144.

[19] Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakosabhasyam*, Louis de La Vallee Poussin, trans., Leo M Pruden, English trans., (Asian Humanities Press, 1988), p. 145.

[20] Bertrand Russell, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, (Lasalle, Ill: Open Court, 1985), p.134.

[21] Hirakawa (1990), p. 144-149.

[22] Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakosabhasyam*, Louis de La Vallee Poussin, trans., Leo M. Pruden, English trans., (Asian Humanities Press, 1988), p. 58.

[23] Theodore Stcherbatsky, (1961), p.32.

[24] Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakosabhasyam*, Louis de La Vallee Poussin, trans., Leo M. Pruden, English trans., (Asian Humanities Press, 1988), p. 225.

[25] Sankara, *Brahma-sutra*, 2.2.20, Radhakrishnan and Moore, trans., *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, (Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 235.

[26] Ishavarakrshna, *Samkhya-Karika*, Radhakrishnan and Moore, trans., *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, (Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 426.

[27] Stcherbatsky (1961), 35.

[28] Ibid., p. 67.

[29] Ibid., p. 67-68.

[30] Ibid., p. 68.

[31] Ibid., p. 68.

[32] Ibid., p. 72.

[33] Ibid., p. 73.

[34] *Abhidharmakosabhasyam*, Louis de La Vallee Poussin, trans., Leo M. Pruden, English trans., (Asian Humanities Press, 1988), p. 228.

[35] Stcherbatsky (1961), p. 80.

[36] David Kalupahana, *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (The University Press of Hawaii, 1975), p. 151.

[37] Ibid., p.152.

[38] The distinction between "analytical cessation" (*pratisankhya-nirodha*) and "nonanalytical cessation" (*apratisankhy-nirodha*) was of course not accepted by all Abhidharma traditions, but is distinctly Sarvastivadin. See, Hirakawa (1990), p. 144-146.

[39] Hirakawa (1990), p. 258.

CHAPTER IV

THE COMPASSIONATE MEDICINE: THE *VIMALAKIRTINIRDESA*

Introduction

The term Mahayana, or "Great Vehicle," is the name given to that tradition in Buddhism that reacted against the "orthodox" scholastic traditions whom they labeled as Hinayana, a "lesser" or "inferior" vehicle. Although scholars are not exactly sure when the Mahayana developed, what is significant is that sometime around the first century BCE, new Buddhist literature developed that was remarkably different from the systematic treatises of the Abhidharma and Theravada traditions. Instead of the dry prose and analytic precision that distinguishes the *abhidharma* texts, the Mahayana sutras are replete with metaphorical and symbolic stories, anecdotes, poetry, and mythological tales. Upon opening any of the early Mahayana texts, one is immediately aware that a significant literary shift has occurred in Buddhist history.

The *Lotus Sutra*, for example, begins like a fairy-tale, with the Buddha sitting in meditation surrounded by monks, Bodhisattvas, Nagas, animals, and thousands of divine and semidivine beings, all participating in a miraculous event.

> And as the Lord had entered upon his meditation, there fell a great rain of divine flowers . . . covering the Lord and the four classes of hearers, while the whole Buddha field shook in six ways; it moved, removed, trembled, trembled from one end to the other, tossed along.
>
> Then did those who were assembled and sitting together in that congregation, monks, nuns, male and female lay devotees, gods, Nagas, goblins, demons, great

serpents, men, and beings not human, as well as rulers of armies and rulers of four continents, all of them with their followers, gaze on the Lord in astonishment, in amazement, in ecstasy.

And at that moment there issued a ray from within the circle of hair between the eyebrows of the Lord. It extended over eighteen hundred thousand Buddha-fields in the eastern quarter, so that all those Buddha fields appeared wholly illuminated by its radiance, down to the great hell and up to the limit of existence. And the beings in any of the six states of existence became visible, all without exception.[1]

This mythological and symbolic depiction of the Buddha is a prevalent feature of most Mahayana texts that developed during this time, and signifies an obvious break from the analytic prose of the *abhidharma* texts. This transition is more than a simple literary innovation, however, and says something about how the Mahayanists view their teachings in relation to scholastic Buddhism. As we learned from the previous chapter, the Abhidharma thinkers relegated the "discourses" of the Buddha to an inferior position, and were thus able to distinguish between *how* the Buddha expressed himself (through metaphor, simile, and anecdotal stories) and an underlying "truth" to which such expressions supposedly referred. For the Abhidharmists, the pedagogical style which the Buddha adopted to convey his teachings was insignificant because "ultimate truth" could not be discovered through "conventional" discourse. Therefore, the notion of "skilful means" was considered immaterial in comparison to a "higher" *dharma* discourse that weeds out the metaphorical and symbolic. The Mahayanists reversed this trend, labeled the Abhidharma analysis of experience a Hinayana, or "inferior" teaching, and placed the *sutras*, or "discourses" of the Buddha above the *abhidharma* texts.

In privileging the *sutras* above the *abhidharma* texts we can see the Mahayanists engaged in an interpretive battle with scholastic Buddhism in which the notion of "skilful means" plays a central role. While the Abhidharma thinkers viewed "skilful means" as a

limited activity in which the Buddha expresses mere "conventional" truths to the low-minded, the Mahayanists see it as the Buddha's highest spiritual practice. The *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras place it alongside *prajna*, or "wisdom," and the famous Madhyamika philosopher, Nagarjuna, says that "skilful means" is the father of a bodhisattva's practice.

> Prajnaparamita is the mother of Bodhisattvas, skill in means is their father, and compassion is their daughter.[2]

Similarly, the *Lotus Sutra* undermines an Abhidharmic interpretation of its own text by stating that the entire *sutra* is an *upaya* which the Buddha uses to help sentient beings.

> I have attained the Buddha-way, and making use of skilful means I proclaim this sutra so that they (sentient beings) may abide in it.[3]

The issue of "skilful means" that distinguishes the literary style of the Mahayana texts also relates to the core principles in Buddhist philosophy. Nirvana, for example, is no longer conceived as a unitary *dharma* which can be reached by "coursing in" or "reviewing" the theoretical "map" which the Scholastic Buddhist spent so much time outlining; rather, *nirvana* was itself one of many "skilful means" used to aid the suffering of sentient beings. As it says in the *Lotus Sutra*:

> To those (who are suffering) I show a device (*upaya*) and say: Put an end to your trouble. When I perceive creatures vexed with mishap I make them see Nirvana.[4]

Similarly, in place of the *arhat* who strove for his own liberation, the Mahayana promoted the bodhisattva, the "enlightened being," who rejected the "selfish" individualism

of the *arhats* and devoted himself to helping others. What distinguishes the bodhisattvas perhaps more than anything else is their ability to use any number of "skilful means" to help sentient beings cross the turbulent stream of *samsara*.

To clarify the importance of "skilful means" within the Mahayana tradition, I will limit my discussion to one text that I think best embodies the practice of "skilful means" in Buddhism, the *Vimalakirtinirdesha*. This is a good text for this chapter because it expresses some of the most important ideas in Mahayana Buddhism, such as the idea of "emptiness" the theory of "two-truths," the "three marks" of existence, and most important, the doctrine of *upaya*. Like the *Perfection of Wisdom* and *Lotus Sutra*, the *Vimalakirti* tells us something about the methodological style of the Dharma, and warns against the tendency to interpret the Buddha's teachings as "philosophical" terms defining something about the nature of reality. All of the Buddha's teachings, including *anatman*, *nirvana*, suffering, and dependent arising, the *Vimalakirti* tells us, are narrative devices, stories used within a soteriological framework and not neutral descriptions about an objective world. In this sense, the *Vimalakirti* represents a direct attack on the Abhidharma tradition and its "theoretical" approach to the Buddha's teachings.

Vimalakirti's Skilful Means

As with most early sutras, nothing definite is known about who wrote *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti* or when it was composed, though the sutra claims to record events surrounding the life of the historical Buddha. Most scholars place it just after the *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras, sometime around the first century of the common era.

The *Vimalakirti* sutra is used by many scholars to support a view which says that, in Buddhism, ultimate truth is something that transcends language and conceptual thought. Many see the ninth chapter as the key to the text, since it deals with the silence of Vimalakirti, or his "lion roar" of speechlessness, which some Buddhists say is the only way to express the ultimate nature of things. The chapter is entitled, "The Dharma-Door of Nonduality" and includes several speeches by bodhisattvas on the meaning of "nonduality." The most significant passage is found at the conclusion of the chapter, which ends with the following exchange between the Bodhisattva Manjusri and Vimalakirti:

> Then, the crown prince Manjusri said to the Licchavi Vimalakirti, "We have all given our own teachings, noble sir. Now, may you elucidate the teaching of the entrance into the principle of nonduality!"
>
> Thereupon, the Licchavi Vimalakirti kept his silence, saying nothing at all!.
>
> The crown prince Manjusri applauded the Licchavi Vimalakirti: "Excellent! Excellent, noble sir! This is indeed the entrance into the nonduality of the bodhisattvas. Here there is no use for syllables, sounds, and ideas."
>
> When these teachings had been declared, five thousand bodhisattvas entered the door of the Dharma of nonduality and attained tolerance of the birthlessness of things.[5]

This exchange precedes several philosophical speeches by at least thirty bodhisattvas on how a bodhisattva enters the "Dharma-door of nonduality," i.e., how one expresses the nature of enlightenment. One by one, the bodhisattvas invoke core Buddhist distinctions, such as self and non-self, bondage and liberation, knowledge and ignorance, grasping and non-grasping, voidness and matter, etc., declaring each pair a dualism and, therefore, incapable of expressing the ultimate nature of existence. Once they have finished, the prince bodhisattva, Manjusri, tells the bodhisattvas that even though their discourses about these distinctions is accurate, their very use of language in trying to combat such dichotomies is itself dualistic.

> Manjusri replied, "Good sirs, you have all spoken well. Nevertheless, all your explanations are themselves dualistic. To know no one teaching, to express nothing, to say nothing, to explain nothing, to announce nothing, to indicate nothing, and to designate nothing--that is the entrance into nonduality."[6]

After saying this, Manjusri then asks Vimalakirti to express what he means by nonduality, and Vimalakirti responds with his famous "lion roar" of silence which is so profound that it inspires five thousand bodhisattvas to enter the "Dharma-door of nonduality." His silence is like the historical Buddha's "noble silence" which, as some Buddhist scholars declare, expresses the ineffable nature of Ultimate Truth.[7]

If Vimalakirti's silence represents the basic Buddhist position toward ultimate reality then it offers clear support for a "mystical" reading of Buddhism. This reading would see Buddhism as committed to a specific ontological view of reality, but one which could only be experienced once words and ideas have been deconstructed. Words and ideas need to be deconstructed because they are dualistic according this view, they make fallacious distinctions and chop the world into discrete entities. Ultimate truth, on the other hand, is undifferentiated and "empty"--it cannot be held captive by words or grasped through a rational "grid."

There are many scholars who read Buddhism in this way, and many who use the Vimalakirti sutra to support their view that "truth" is something beyond verbal and conceptual discriminations.

Michael Pye hints at a different way to approach the *Vimalakirti* sutra. He sees the entire text as a teaching about the doctrine of *upaya*. Rather than beginning with chapter VII which contains Vimalakirti's silence, Pye begins with the second chapter entitled "Skilful Means" and shows how it connects with the other twelve chapters, thus forming the hermeneutic backbone of the entire piece. Along with the *Lotus Sutra*, says Pye, the

Vimalakirti hinges on the use of "skilful means" to the extent that it is impossible to grasp what is being taught without taking this into account. According to Pye, whatever is expressed in the sutra, including the teachings on "nonduality" and Vimalakirti's silence is done within the context of *upaya*, and should not be interpreted in a literal or straightforward manner.[8]

Pye's analysis of the *Vimalakirti* is devoted mainly to showing how the text uses the idea of *upaya*, and to making the point about its centrality in understanding what the text is about. What interests me about his thesis are the implications regarding how we should understand Buddhist philosophy. In particular, I am interested in the claim advanced by many Buddhist thinkers that Buddhism is committed to a certain conception of truth. I think this is a misguided approach to Buddhism, and one that is clearly thwarted by the doctrine of *upaya*. While some scholars say that Buddhism reveals an ineffable "truth" beyond the limitations of speech, others say that Buddhism is trying to show us the conventional nature of all phenomena; and what both positions share is a deeper assumption regarding the necessity to discover some truth about the world.

The *Vimalakirti* sutra opposes this approach and replaces the search for "truth" with the practice of "skilful means." The way it does this is by describing Buddhist doctrine as narrative explanations, discourses, and "fictional" tales. Buddhist teachings are stories, the sutra will tell us, told to a specific audience with the goal of helping this audience. The narrative dimension which the sutra highlights is both an attempt to wrest Buddhist doctrine away from those who seek to reduce it to a fixed world-view, and an attempt to revitalize the spirit of compassion which Buddhist doctrine is meant to serve. These are not two distinct goals, however. The reductive approach which searches for a "truth" to Buddhist doctrine is criticized in the sutra for losing touch with its audience; it is searching for

something beyond the particular needs of individuals and, as a result, has distanced itself from that aspect of compassion which can only be experienced through direct participation in the lives and activities of other people. Its quest for "truth" is thus counterproductive: it searches for truth with the hope that it will liberate sentient beings--and thus begins with a sense of compassion--but ends in alienating itself from this goal by losing touch with whom those others are. It thus becomes non-compassionate.

The sutra's emphasis on the narrative dimension of Buddhist doctrine struggles to reverse this trend by showing how the Dharma can best suit the needs of others. It does this by telling us that the teachings which Vimalakirti and the Buddha espouse are "fictional" devices that develop in response to the needs and dispositions of others. Rather than neutral observations about the status of "all" human beings or propositions regarding the nature of reality--the sutra explains that Buddhist teachings are relevant only in the contexts of certain people's lives. Given different contexts, however, different teachings will be used, even if that means stepping outside the "orthodox" Buddhist world-view. As we will see, the sutra's emphasis on a plurality of teachings stems from its assumption that no single teaching is sufficient to solve the diversity of problems that individuals face in their daily lives. To make these points clear, I should explain the *Vimalakirti* in more detail.

The main figure in the sutra, Vimalakirti, is described as a person who embodies the highest virtues of the Buddhist life. What is interesting about Vimalakirti, however, is that he is neither a monk living a life of piety nor a bodhisattva. Instead, Vimalakirti is a layman. He enjoys the pleasures of the family life, has a wife and son, engages in business, and associates daily with other ordinary lay people, such as gamblers, warriors, government officials, businesspeople, prostitutes, and so forth. And yet, as the second

chapter, entitled, "Skilful Means," tells us, he excels in the virtues of what it means to be a Buddhist.

> Having served the ancient Buddhas, he had generated the roots of virtue by honoring them and making offerings to them. He had attained tolerance as well as eloquence. He played with the great superknowledges. He had attained the power of incantations and the fearlessnesses. He had conquered all demons and opponents. He had penetrated the profound way of the Dharma. He was liberated through the transcendence of wisdom. Having integrated his realization with skill in liberative technique, he was expert in knowing the thoughts and actions of living beings. Knowing the strength or weakness of their faculties, and being gifted with unrivaled eloquence, he taught the Dharma appropriately to each . . . He lived with the deportment of a Buddha, and his superior intelligence was as wide as the ocean.[9]

Vimalakirti's ability to experience the depths of Buddhist wisdom while simultaneously remaining within everyday life is an important theme which runs throughout the text, and is meant to be an ethical and religious ideal. This is what Pye emphasizes in his analysis of the sutra. He highlights certain passages which connect "wisdom" with "skilful means," and passages which say that without skilful means one remains in bondage, and makes a point about *upaya's* importance in a practitioner's life. In other words, what makes Vimalakirti an ideal Buddhist for Pye is that even though Vimalakirti has attained *prajna* he nevertheless does not retreat into seclusion or withdraw into otherworldly meditation, but remains active in everyday life and strives to help others. What allows him to do this is *upaya*, which in this context symbolizes the complete integration of "wisdom" and ethical practice: although Vimalakirti has attained "wisdom," his compassion motivates him to help others. What interests Pye about the sutra, therefore, is how *upaya* works to embody wisdom into every day, practical life.

The point I want to focus on is somewhat different, and has more to do with how the "truths" of Buddhist philosophy are conveyed in the text. The "Noble Truth" of

suffering, for example, as well as impermanence, non-substantiality, "emptiness" and the doctrine of "two truths" are dealt with extensively in the sutra. These ideas are to a large extent foundational in Buddhist philosophy; their importance underlies almost every discussion that has ever taken place in regards to Buddhist ethics, epistemology, and the problems surrounding liberation. The way the *Vimalakirti* treats these Buddhist doctrines, however, is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, the text promotes Buddhist teachings in a literal and straightforward manner (i.e., as "truths"), but then immediately subverts their status as "truth" by pronouncing them to be nothing other than "skilful means." As we will see, this dual aspect of positing Buddhist doctrines as "truths" while simultaneously subverting their position as "truths" is part of a larger strategy for helping others. I think the easiest way to express this is to say that we can only fully make sense of those doctrines which are put forward as "true" when the audience to which these doctrines are addressed is taken into account. That is, the Buddhist views of suffering, impermanence, "emptiness," non-substantiality, and so forth, which are advanced as "truths," are done so for a particular audience with the hope that by saying this they will be liberated from suffering. It is thus only within this specific context that the *Vimalakirti* wants us to understand the terms and doctrines of Buddhist philosophy.

Let me explain these points by showing how the *Vimalakirti* treats the basic Buddhist position that all life is characterized by sickness, (*duhkha*), impermanence (*anitya*), and nonsubstantiality (*anatman*), traditionally known as the "three marks of existence."

Vimalakirti and the "Three Marks" of Existence

In the "Skilful Means" chapter Vimalakirti preaches to some villagers about the pains and diseases of an embodied life.

> Friends, this body is so impermanent, fragile, unworthy of confidence, and feeble. It is so insubstantial, perishable, short-lived, painful, filled with diseases, and subject to changes . . . It is like a magical illusion, consisting of falsifications. It is like a dream, being an unreal vision. It is like a reflection, being the image of former actions. It is like an echo, being dependent on conditions . . . Therefore, you should be repulsed by such a body.[10]

This passage is the first discourse which Vimalakirti gives, and, as will be shown below, is strikingly similar to the first sermon given by the Gautama Buddha. So far, it seems that what he says is intended in a very literal sense. The body, which includes almost every aspect of experiential life, is inherently contaminated and should be seen as repulsive. It is *duhkha*. "What terrors are we not exposed to by the mere fact of having a body!" says Conze, commenting on the doctrine of *duhkha*, "Much pleasure is followed by bad karmic consequences (punishment), and by fresh craving which ties us to this world."[11] The body is "short lived" and impermanent, it is an "echo" without substance, and an "image" which bears the fruit of all past conditioning. Therefore, says Vimalakirti, we should be repulsed by it.

But Vimalakirti is not alone in saying this. In fact, he simply repeats almost word for word what the Buddha expressed in his first sermon at Banares. The Buddha's basic position as outlined in the First Noble Truth was that all conditioned things share three "marks" or characteristics (*lakshana*). All things, he said, are (1) impermanent, (2) ill, and (3) non-substantial. The three lakshanas are so basic to the Buddha's thought that it is

almost impossible to speak of "Buddhist philosophy" without taking them into account. The sutra is thus making an explicit connection between Vimalakirti and the Buddha. This connection is important because in telling us how to interpret Vimalakirti's statement the sutra is also commenting on the nature of Buddhist philosophy. To see how this works, we should review the three "marks" as they are ordinarily understood by Buddhist thinkers.

The idea of impermanence is one of the basic ontological "marks" in Buddhism. Upon analysis of experience, we supposedly never find anything which remains the same. As the Abhidharma tradition held, all *dharmas* are born, remain for an instant, and then die almost as soon as they are born, leaving nothing but a continuous flow of experiential events that rise and cease at every instance. And yet, like Vimalakirti, the Buddha also says that whatever is impermanent should be treated as ill and therefore rejected. "What is impermanent, that is not worth delighting in, not worth being impressed by, not worth clinging to." It is not worth "clinging to" because the impermanent "mark" of existence is bound up with suffering, *duhkha*, the second "mark." One should not cling to impermanent phenomena because they are characterized by pain and suffering. As the Buddha says:

> Now this, O monks, is the noble truth of *duhkha*: birth is painful, old age is painful, sickness is painful, death is painful, sorrow, lamentation, dejection, and despair are painful. Contact with the unpleasant is painful, not getting what one wishes is painful. In short, the five *skandhas* of grasping are painful.[12]

All of life, therefore, which is "marked" by the process of birth, decay, and death, i.e., impermanence, is connected to pain and should therefore be rejected. Like Vimalakirti, the Buddha taught that one should cultivate a sense of disgust with an impermanent body, since it is the seat of pain and suffering. "In short," says the Buddha, "the five *skandhas* of

grasping are painful," and, in what is called the "Fire Sermon," he tells us to cultivate a sense of aversion for the eye and the impressions it receives, the ear and sounds, the nose and odors, the body and things tangible, and so on. "This body," says Vimalakirti echoing the Buddha, "is filthy, being an agglomeration of pus and excrement . . . Therefore, you should be repulsed by such a body."[13]

Along with the "marks" of impermanence and pain, there is the third characteristic of existence, non-substantiality, or *anatta*, usually translated as "non-self." In speaking of the body, Vimalakirti says that it is "insubstantial . . . like a water bubble . . . selfless, like water . . . and nonsubstantial, like space."[14] He is obviously referring to the doctrine of *anatta* taught by the Buddha, which is the denial of an eternal "self" or substantial ego. Upon analyzing experience we supposedly find nothing that is fixed or independent that we could call a "self," and nothing which lasts long enough that we could describe as having some type of substantial or essential characteristic. Rather, all things are dependently related through a process of conditioning, and always "turbulent," or changing. It is because all things are conditioned and impermanent that they are characterized as "non-substantial" or *anatta*. In the *Samyutta-nikaya*, for example, the Buddha positively rejects the idea of a "self."

> The body, monks is selfless. If the body, monks, were the self, this body would not be subject to sickness, and it would be possible in the case of the body to say, "Let my body be thus, let my body not be thus." Now, because the body is soulless, monks, therefore the body is subject to sickness, and it is not possible in the case of the body to say "Let my body be thus, let my body be thus."
>
> Consciousness is soulless. For if consciousness were the soul, this consciousness would not be subject to sickness, and it would not be possible in the case of consciousness to say, "Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness not be thus."
>
> Therefore in truth, monks, whatever body, past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, low or eminent, near or far, is to be looked on by him who duly and rightly understands, as, "all this body is not mine, not this am I, not mine is the soul." (And so of feeling, perception, etc.)[15]

The argument the Buddha gives for the "third mark" of existence relies on the view that if there were a "self" it would have to be permanent, eternal, and "uncontaminated" by conditioned phenomena. However, neither the body nor consciousness (or any other aspect of experience) are immune from diseases--and are therefore conditioned. As all conditioned phenomena are dependently arisen, they are therefore "selfless."

These three "marks," then, are supposedly the basic features of existence. Whatever exists is impermanent, painful, and without a substantial "self." The *Vimalakirti* takes up this basic Buddhist position in regards to life and, if read in a literal and straightforward way, promotes it as an objective "truth." As I will argue in what follows, however, this type of reading cannot be sustained. In fact, it should become clear as we proceed that the sutra tries to undermine such a literal reading by placing all Buddhist discourse on the level of "fictional" devices appropriate for the needs of individuals.

To begin with, the sutra reveals this "fictional" aspect of Buddhist doctrine even before Vimalakirti says a word about the sickness of the body. In the "Skilful Means" chapter, for instance, we are told that Vimalakirti fakes an illness. He pretends to manifest himself as *duhkha* so that the villagers he lives with (and later in the text, the disciples and bodhisattvas) will come and visit him. The sutra describes it as follows:

> At that time, out of this very skill in liberative technique (*upaya*), Vimalakirti manifested himself as if sick. To inquire after his health, the king, the officials, the lords, the youths, the aristocrats, the householders, the businessmen, the townsfolk, the country folk, and thousands of other living beings came froth from the great city of Vaisali and called on the invalid. When they arrived, Vimalakirti taught them the Dharma.[16]

What he goes on to teach them was already quoted above: the "truth" of *duhkha*. His teaching is nevertheless complicated by the fact that the sutra describes Vimalakirti as

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not being completely "truthful." He fabricates a story about being sick so that the villagers will come visit him, and when they finally do come, he teaches them about the "sickness" of the world. The connection here should be obvious. Vimalakirti's own sickness is "fictitious"; it is a ruse he employs to get the villagers to come see him. But the content of his teachings--that which refers to the three "marks" of existence--is no doubt "fictitious" in the same sense. His own sickness and his teaching about sickness are identical. Neither are "true" in an objective or absolute sense, since they are "fictional" devices used for certain purposes. Vimalakirti's discourse about the nature of suffering, impermanence, and nonsubstantiality is therefore an *upayic* story that makes sense only in the context of helping this particular audience. The sutra makes this clear to the reader not only by connecting Vimalakirti's feigned illness with what he says, but by including this entire event under the chapter entitled, "Skilful Means."

But why does Vimalakirti do this? Why does he both "fictionalize" an illness and teach things that are not "ultimately" true? This is the type of question that Manjusri asks Vimalakirti in the fifth chapter, and he responds with the following statement.

> You ask me, Manjusri, whence comes my sickness; the sicknesses of the bodhisattvas arise from great compassion.[17]

Another way of putting this is to say that the reason Vimalakirti manifests himself as ill, and subsequently teaches that all things are *duhkha*, is due to compassion. He sees others suffering in life and, "out of this very skill in liberative technique" (i.e., upaya), strives to help them. He does this in two ways: first, by "fictionalizing" his own sickness to bring the villagers (and then the disciples and bodhisattvas) to come visit him, and second, by telling a story about *duhkha* because he thinks this particular story will help these particular people overcome their attachments. The important point is that it is his

desire to help which dictates and molds what he says; it decides the content and substance of the teaching, and not the other way around. The issue is not one of saying what "is" or "is not," or of making neutral observations about the nature of reality. Rather, the issue is one of helping others.

The connection between the First Noble Truth and *upaya* alters Buddhist thought as a simple "truth" about existence and transforms it into a device that is appropriate for the needs and dispositions of certain individuals. Thus, the first "Truth" of Buddhism is not really a "truth" at all, at least if we think of "truth" as something objective or absolute. Rather, the reason for saying that it is a truth, i.e., describing existence as impermanent, painful, and non-substantial, is *upayic*, which immediately undercuts its status as "truth." When Vimalakirti tells the villagers that the body is "filthy" and insubstantial--which is exactly what the Buddha said--he is simply trying to initiate a sense of detachment in his listeners. With a different audience, he would have taught something quite different, in fact something completely opposite.

That Vimalakirti does teach different doctrines and views depending on the audience is clearly expressed in the sutra's chapter on "Skilful Means" where Vimalakirti is described as not only "teaching the Dharma appropriately to each," which is the prime gift of *upaya*, but of teaching a variety of lifestyles, some of which are quite contrary to "orthodox" Buddhist practice. In chapter 8, for example, he shocks Buddhist disciples by proclaiming that even the most "evil" actions can be part of a bodhisattva's path. According to Vimalakirti, the bodhisattva may follow the ways of demons, wickedness, anger, immorality, and the heterodox teachings contrary to Buddhism.

> He may follow the ways of avarice, yet he gives away all internal and external things without regard even for his own life. He may follow the ways of wickedness and anger, yet he remains utterly free of malice and lives by love. He may follow

> the ways of laziness, yet his efforts are uninterrupted as he strives in the cultivation of roots of virtue. He may follow the ways of sensuous distraction, yet, naturally concentrated, his contemplation is not dissipated. He may follow the ways of false wisdom, yet, having reached the transcendence of wisdom, he is expert in all mundane and transcendental sciences.[18]

The Buddha is portrayed in the *Upayakausalya Sutra* as practicing some of the activities suggested by Vimalakirti. He broke his monastic vows to have sex with a young woman who was about to kill herself because the Buddha would not sleep with her, and he killed a man to prevent him from murdering 500 other people. Such practices are clearly against "orthodox" doctrine, and yet tell us that the Noble Eightfold Path is not fixed or absolute. Buddhist morality is itself an *upaya*, and, when guided by compassion, the Buddha and Bodhisattvas do whatever is necessary to help sentient beings.

Vimalakirti's ability to teach a variety of doctrines should therefore make us think twice about ascribing any type of "truth" to what he says. His use of the three "marks" does not point to something objective or "out there" in the world, but is used for "teaching the Dharma appropriately to each."

The claim that the three "marks" of existence are not describing the nature of reality, which is how I am interpreting the *Vimalakirti* sutra, seems to go against the way Buddhism is generally interpreted. Most texts on Buddhism tend to accept the three "marks" as obvious facts about existence by proclaiming the "truth" of an impermanent, selfless, and conditioned universe. Underlying their explanations is the assumption, sometimes explicit and other times not, about the impossibility of overcoming attachments, living a good life, or experiencing liberation without seeing reality in a particular way. We are often told that all the problems in life derive from not seeing ourselves as "selfless" and "empty," and from not seeing that the basis of existence is nothing but a continuous flow of

interdependent phenomena. We are also told that liberation is contingent upon getting this picture of reality right.

If this approach is correct, then Buddhism is primarily ontological in the sense that what motivates it philosophically is the attempt to describe existence. An ontological view is privileged in this approach because the ability to experience what the bodhisattvas experience is contingent upon a correct understanding of the world. The core Buddhist terms, such as *sunyata*, nonsubstantiality, "suchness," dependent arising, and impermanence describe what this truth is like, according to this approach, and to be a Buddhist means to either access it yourself, as an arhat does, or to help others access it. as a bodhisattva does. Either way, what is at stake is getting to the truth of existence.

But it is specifically this approach to Buddhism that the *Vimalakirti* sutra warns against. This is evident in the third and fourth chapters when Vimalakirti castigates certain disciples and bodhisattvas for preaching the Dharma as if it were a static truth, and who therefore remain ignorant of the needs and dispositions of their audience. But the Dharma, he says, "is not a secure refuge,"[19] meaning that it is not a fixed analysis of reality, and "without examining the spiritual faculties of living beings one can wound those who are without wounds."[20] These two chapters are devoted almost exclusively to scenes where Vimalakirti interrupts the speeches of the disciples and bodhisattvas, and either shows them, like Socrates, that they have no idea what they are espousing, or chastises them for being disconnected from their audience. When the Buddha asks the disciple, Purna, to go visit Vimalakirti and inquire about his illness, for example, he responds with the following story,

> Lord, I am indeed reluctant to go to this good man to inquire about his illness. Why? Lord, I remember one day, when I was teaching the Dharma to some young monks in the great forest, the Licchaavi Vimalakirti came there and said to me,

"Reverend Purna, first concentrate yourself, regard the minds of these young bhiksus, and then teach them the Dharma! Do not put rotten food into a jeweled bowl! First understand the inclinations of these monks, and do not confuse priceless sapphires with glass beads![21]

Understandably, in later chapters the disciples and bodhisattvas are reluctant to go see Vimalakirti again, on account of his harsh tone with those who simply preach without integrating the practice of "skilful means."

Vimalakirti's attack on the disciples and bodhisattvas can also be read as saying something about how attachment to "truth" detracts from the ability to help others in a compassionate way. The disciples and bodhisattvas seem to think that people can be helped by simply instilling a "truth" into their heads. They not only assume that they have this "correct" view of the way the world is, but think that if everyone else had it then they too would be cured. Therefore, a certain conception of the world precedes their direct involvement with others. When Vimalakirti says, however, that those "who do not know the thoughts or the inclinations of others are not able to teach the Dharma to anyone,"[22] he reverses this priority. Direct contact with others precedes teaching the Dharma, and not the other way around. In fact, it is implied that it is impossible to really teach the Dharma, the greatest act of compassion in Buddhism, by being disconnected from one's audience.

The Narrative Medicine: The Dharma as Upaya

The sutra's emphasis on the importance of knowing who the audience is before espousing any doctrine becomes clear in the tenth chapter when the bodhisattvas ask Vimalakirti how the Buddha goes about teaching the Dharma. His answer is a clear exposition on the nature of *upaya* and on why the Buddha teaches certain doctrines.

> Good sirs, these living beings here are hard to discipline. Therefore, he teaches them with discourses appropriate for the disciplining of the wild and uncivilized. How does he discipline the wild and uncivilized? What discourses are appropriate? Here they are:
> "This is hell. This is the animal world. This is the world of the lord of the death. These are the adversities. These are the rebirth with crippled faculties. These are physical misdeeds, and these are the retributions for physical misdeeds . . . This is false wisdom and this is the fruit of false wisdom . . . This is the path and that is the wrong path. This is virtue and that is evil. This is blameworthy and that is blameless. This is defiled and that is immaculate. This is mundane and that is transcendental. This is compounded and that is uncompounded. this is passion and that is purification. This is life and that is liberation."
> Thus, by means of these varied explanations of the Dharma, the Buddha trains the minds of those living beings who are just like wild horses. Just as wild horses or wild elephants will not be tamed unless the goad pierces them to the marrow, so living beings who are wild and hard to civilize are disciplined only by means of discourses about all kinds of miseries.[23]

Brief as this passage is, it contains the most significant Buddhist ideas. It expresses the idea that life is samsaric and full of pain, that there are karmic retributions for certain acts, that there are compounded and uncompounded realms, and that there is such a thing called liberation. Rather than describing a true state of nature, however, Vimalakirti says that the Buddha's reason for stating such views is to discipline unruly minds. He notes that the teachings are specific, directed toward the concrete problems of individuals, and not claims demanding a universal following. It is thus not metaphysical speculation--but practical advice. To teach the Dharma otherwise, as Vimalakirti notes, will "wound those who are without wounds."

What the above passage states about Buddhist doctrine is the exact opposite of a view which sees Buddhism as promoting an ontological truth. In fact, it clearly suggests that the terms and categories which the Buddha relies on are not descriptive in the "traditional" philosophical sense. What this means is that the Buddha is not teaching a

"truth" and is not working with the assumption that it is necessary to discover truth in order to transform one's life. In this context, truth is not an issue at all.

The passage also implies something about the ability to overcome attachment. In attempting to "train the minds of those living beings who are just like wild horses," the Buddha is trying to get them to be less attached to their "wild" side and more focused on discipline. His way of going about this, as Vimalakirti says, is to teach them discourses appropriate to their needs and dispositions. In other words, he teaches them *upayas* and not discourses on "truth." Therefore, according to the sutra the ability to overcome attachment is not contingent upon discovering the nature of reality. This may seem trivial, and perhaps even obvious to some, but it relates to the way Buddhism is often portrayed in scholarly studies.

It is often assumed, for example, that suffering arises due to attachment, and that attachment arises from a faulty conception of reality, i.e., ignorance. So, to overcome attachment, which means to overcome suffering, one needs a correct view of reality, i.e., knowledge. The Abhidharma philosophers took a position like this, which is why they felt it necessary to give a detailed explanation of causation. It is also a view common to Classical Indian philosophy in general. The *Vimalakirti* sutra, however, does not adopt this view. It is not assumed by either the Buddha or Vimalakirti that one needs "knowledge" in order to overcome attachment because this is not what they espouse in order to help people overcome suffering. They give stories about hell realms and reincarnation, about how all things are impermanent and "empty," and stories about how "this is mundane and that is transcendental." It is obvious that they are stories and not truths because the sutra tells us as much by emphasizing the fact that all discourses are none other than "various explanations"

(i.e., "skilful means"). According to the sutra, therefore, the ability to overcome attachment is not contingent upon "knowing" how the world is formed.

I am emphasizing the lack of truth in regards *upaya* because of its importance in understanding both the *Vimalakirti* and Buddhist philosophy in general. For those who view Buddhism as committed to a certain conception of truth, it might be said that I am only emphasizing what the Buddhists consider "conventional" truth. That is, someone might agree that the teachings about impermanence, suffering, and non-self, are in fact *upayas*, but only because such teachings are strictly verbal. Ultimate truth, on the other hand, can never be verbalized, and is thus separate from any conventional designation, story, or discourse. It could even be argued further that the Buddha and Vimalakirti do whatever they can to release beings from suffering, even if that means saying certain things which are not "ultimately" true. In fact, whatever words they use are necessarily *upayas*, limited as they are to the expression of "conventions," stories, and half-truths.

This position has the advantage of relying on a distinction between two truths which has a long history in Mahayana Buddhism. The most famous example comes from Nagarjuna, when he says:

> The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma
> Is based on two truths:
> A truth of worldly convention
> And an ultimate truth.
>
> Those who do not understand
> The distinction drawn between these two truths
> Do not understand
> The Buddha's profound truth.[24]

We will have time to examine the context of Nagarjuna's statement in the following chapters. What is significant at this point is his use of a common distinction within the

Mahayana tradition. It is also a distinction used by those who want to support the claim that Buddhism is committed to discovering a truth about existence, or that truth is necessary for salvation. But Vimalakirti makes a distinction between two truths as well, and before we see how he uses it, I want to briefly explain two common interpretations of the "two truths" doctrine. In this way, we will see just how much Vimalakirti's use of it differs.

I have already hinted at one interpretation of the "two truths" theory. It is probably the most popular, and goes something like this: "conventional" truth is anything which deals in language and conceptual analysis. It is the realm of the every day, of suffering, of causal relations, of space and time, and of anything which we could possibly imagine through the use of thoughts and words. "Ultimate" truth, on the other hand, is the final goal of Buddhist insight, meditation, and practice. It transcends speech and the "mundane" world, is pure, unalloyed bliss, non-conceptual, and non-dual, and beyond all categories and thought constructions. Thus, since *upaya* traffics in words and concepts, it is merely "conventional" in relation to that which ultimately exists. The Buddha and bodhisattvas have already realized ultimate truth, and simply use *upayas* in a conventional sense to bring sentient beings closer to the "Truth." This view approaches the "two truths" theory by saying that "ultimate truth" is a type of realm that is realized once one stops imposing conceptual categories onto reality.

Another common way of interpreting the "two truths" theory in Buddhism is to say that the difference between the two is a matter of how we interpret the phenomenal world. It is a bit more complex than the first, but runs something like this: what Buddhism means by "ultimate truth" is the fact that there is no Ultimate Truth. The problem of existence stems from taking what is merely "conventional" for something "ultimate"--in other words, from taking what has been constructed through language and social practices as objectively

real. This is considered a problem because when we take things as objectively real we become attached to them, and hence suffer. So, the way to overcome this is to realize that what one takes as real is, in fact, conventional, and that what we think is "ultimate" is really conditioned by culture, language, the mind, and so forth. One way this is expressed is by saying that all conventions are "empty" of ultimate meaning, or that, ultimately, the conventional is just what it is without attributing any more significance to it than that. The idea of *upaya*, therefore, is obviously "conventional" since there is nothing else but conventions to existence. This approach to the "two truth" theory has a paradoxical flavor about it, and is more difficult to make sense of than the first.

The above two ways of interpreting the "two truths" theory are explained in more sophisticated terms than my brief overview, and we will return to them in the next chapter when we come to Nagarjuna. The reason for citing them now, however, is that both share an approach to Buddhist philosophy which I think is rejected by the *Vimalakirti* sutra. The first claims that Buddhism is striving to articulate an ultimate truth independent from conventions, while the second claims exactly the opposite. But what they both share is the assumption that Buddhism is committed to "truth." For instance, both assume that it is necessary to get absolutely clear on how the world is constituted, what is real, what the nature of attachment is, and how liberation comes about. Though they may differ on whether the "two truths" describe a transcendent realm, they nevertheless share the belief that the distinction points to something about the nature of existence, be it conventional, ultimate, or otherwise.

Let us examine how the *Vimalakirti* sutra approaches the topic. The distinction between the "two truths" is first made in the "Skilful Means" chapter, and is included in the very same passage which has Vimalakirti's discourse to the villagers. After teaching them

about impermanence, non-self, and the body's "filthy" nature, he implores the villagers to transcend such things and strive for a higher reality: the body of the Tathagata.

> Friends, the body of a Tathagata is the body of Dharma, born of gnosis. The body of a Tathagata is born of the stores of merit and wisdom. It is born of morality, of meditation, of wisdom, of the liberations, and of the knowledge and vision of liberation . . . It is born of the concentrations, the liberations, the meditations, and the absorptions . . . It is born of all the transcendences . . . It is born of truth. It is born of reality. It is born of conscious awareness.[25]

And in another passage already quoted, Vimalakirti says in a way similar to Nagarjuna that the Buddha relies on making a distinction between two types of truths. He teaches, says Vimalakirti, by saying things like the following:

> This is mundane and that is transcendental. This is compounded and that is uncompounded. This is passion and that is purification. This is life and that is liberation.[26]

What is significant about these passages is that both take place within the context of a larger discussion about "skilful means." As for the first passage, it was already noted above how the teachings on impermanence and *duhkha* are framed within the topic of *upaya*. But the movement of Vimalakirti's discourse from teaching about *duhkha* to teaching about a transcendent "truth" does not veer away from that topic. It is still as an *upaya* that the distinction is made. The second passage is more explicit on this point, since Vimalakirti clearly states that the distinction between the mundane and transcendent is simply one of the "varied explanations" which the Buddha uses. Thus, though the distinction refers to two realms, or two "truths," it is not a truthful claim--i.e., it is not about the nature of reality or the nature of truth.

Saying that Vimalakirti's use of the "two truths" distinction is non-descriptive of "truth" challenges a common prejudice among Western Buddhist scholars. This prejudice is

revealed in the assumption that if a person fails to understand the world correctly then he misses the salvific experience of nirvana.

The *Vimalakirti* sutra challenges this assumption by describing the "two truths" not in philosophical terms--but as narrative stories. This makes the attempt to search for any epistemological or ontological "truth" to which these narratives could point misguided. When we understand something as a story, we don't ask the types of questions typical of philosophers. Unless the story is meant to describe an actual event, we don't ask if it is true or false, or if it defines something "objective" in the world. Our understanding of it *as* a story precludes asking these types of questions. It is only when we forget that it is a story that we begin treating it in propositional terms and search for some underlying "truth" to what it says. Vimalakirti's "fictional" expression of *duhkha*, as well as his teachings on the three "marks," "two truths" and "emptiness" have this type of narrative status; they are motivated by compassion and described as simply one of many "varied explanations" which the Buddhas and bodhisattvas use in order to help sentient beings. The quest for an essence to the teachings, then, or the desire to search for some objective criteria that would make them "true" is a sign that one has forgotten that they are in fact just stories.

A similar complaint against this type of "forgetfulness" can be found in Nietzsche's critique of Western science. "It is perhaps dawning on five or six minds," he says, "that physics, too, is only an interpretation and exegesis of the world (to suit us, if I may say so!) and *not* a world-explanation."[27] According to Nietzsche, the error of science is that it has mistaken a story for a "fact," and mistook its own narrative explanation for something objective and "true." His evaluation of science, as he says, has nothing to do with whether it is objectively true or false. Rather, he evaluates science in terms of the story it tells and asks if it is a good one. His response, as most philosophers know, is that the story is not

good, since he thinks it paints a nihilistic picture of life. So, to counter this nihilistic story, Nietzsche offers a different one, the "eternal return." The story can be found in the *Gay Science*, and proceeds this way:

> What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more, and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and every sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence--even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!"[28]

In commenting on this passage, Alexander Nehamas observes that Nietzsche is not prescribing the "eternal return" as an objective "truth" about the cosmos. "What he is interested in," says Nehamas, "is the attitude one must have toward oneself in order to react with joy and despair to the possibility the demon raises."[29] In other words, Nietzsche uses the idea of the eternal return as a narrative device that he thinks has the capacity to transform a life based in fear and resentment to one of joy and creativity. He uses it as a catalyst. To ask whether the eternal return is true or false, or whether it depicts an accurate ontological picture of the world not only to misses the point of the story, but turns a simple narrative tale into a metaphysical problem.

The Abhidharma philosophers took this "metaphysical" route by trying to define the nature of reality in "objective" and "scientific" terms. They failed to see that the Buddha's comments were just narratives and began searching for ways to philosophically justify what he said. The Buddha's teachings on non-substantiality and impermanence, for example, were interpreted ontologically by the Abhidharma thinkers, which is why they analyzed all experience down to individual *dharmas* (to show the lack of "self-hood" in objects and compounded things) and debated over the different types of time-periods an

impermanent *dharma* could traverse (e.g., could an impermanent *dharma* exist in the past, future, and present simultaneously, or only in the present?) Their analysis of experience, and subsequently their claim that it is impossible to achieve nirvana without understanding reality as composed of nothing but dharmas, was the direct result of taking what the Buddha said as describing an underlying reality.

The *Vimalakirti's* insistence on the narrative dimension of Buddhist doctrine is a direct assault on this way of thinking. It tells us that "emptiness," *nirvana*, impermanence, "non-self," and the "two truths" are nothing more than rhetorical strategies used within a particular discourse, and warns against the dangers of taking these terms in a non-narrative, "truthful" way. This warning is expressed in the character of Vimalakirti, who tells us that our attachment to "truth" can actually stand in the way of practicing the Dharma since it leads us away from the concrete differences of individuals. The Abhidharma's "metaphysical" approach to Buddhist doctrine is thus analogous to those disciples and bodhisattvas who are criticized by Vimalakirti for preaching the Dharma in a detached way: they interpret the Dharma universally, as a "truth" about the world, and think they can preach without even knowing their audience. They all assume that everyone suffers from the same problem, and that this problem can only be cured by following a set remedy. The *Vimalakirti* condemns this approach by replacing a "truthful" analysis of the Dharma with a "skilful means" approach, which entails seeing certain teachings within Buddhism as narrative devices (*upayas*) for helping sentient beings.

One of the things that distinguishes a "truthful" analysis of the Dharma from a narrative approach is that while the former tends toward a single "theory" about how to help others achieve liberation, the latter is pluralistic and open. Because it has no commitment to "truth" and no totalizing "theory" about the suffering of all sentient beings,

the narrative approach is open to using any number of heuristic devices. "For this reason," says the Buddha in the *Lotus Sutra*, "I use hundred thousands of various skilful means, such as different interpretations, indications, explanations, illustrations," and so forth.[30]

The multiplicity of approaches to helping others is made clear in chapter 11 of the *Vimalakirti*, entitled "Lesson of the Destructible and Indestructible." This chapter emphasizes an important point about not adopting any overarching theory (or story) since there are many ways to help living beings. The point is made by the Buddha in a speech to Ananda, and is expressed in the following way:

> "There are (discourses) that accomplish the Buddha-work by means of bodhisattvas; those that do so by means of lights; those that do so by means of the tree of enlightenment . . . those that do so by means of religious robes . . . those that do so by means of magical incarnations; those that do so by means of empty space; and those that do so by means of lights in the sky. Why is it so, Ananda? Because by these various means, living beings become disciplined. Similarly, Ananda, there are (discourses) that accomplish the buddha-work by means of teaching living being words, definitions, examples, such as 'dreams,' 'images,' . . . echoes,' 'illusions,' and 'mirages'; and those that accomplish the buddha-work by making words understandable. Also Ananda, there are (discourses) that accomplish the buddha-work for living beings without speech, by silence, inexpressibility, and unteachability. Ananda, among all the activities, enjoyments, and practices of the Buddhas, there are none that do not accomplish the buddha-work, because all discipline living beings."[31]

Each of these views, as the Buddha says, has the potential to transform a person's life. They are stories which can help people change, making the question of whether they are objectively "true" or "false" completely mistaken in this context. A "truthful" analysis of the Dharma is rejected because it tends to neglect the different dispositions of individuals by assuming not only that everyone suffers from the same problem but that there is one correct ontological picture of reality that will solve this problem.

Buddhist scholars sometimes neglect this *upayic* approach by assuming that Buddhism has discovered *the* problem to life's ills. It is generally held, for example that attachment is the source of suffering, but scholars disagree as to exactly what it is we are all attached to. Some say we are attached to linguistic conventions and that if we "let go" of these we will experience a transcendent truth. Others say we are attached to a desire to have a transcendent truth, and that if we "let go" of this then all of our problems will be solved since we will stop hankering after an illusion. The shared assumption of both views is that all problems can be reduced to a single fault.

The *Vimalakirti* sutra teaches just the opposite. The character Vimalakirti does not begin with a conception of "truth" which he teaches indiscriminately to all alike. Rather, like the Buddha in the above passage Vimalakirti begins with the concrete dispositions of individuals and then "teaches the Dharma appropriately to each." His emphasis on the "numerous teachings" and "varied explanations" of the Dharma not only underlines the fact that there are different problems depending on the individual, but also makes an important point about a plurality of approaches, doctrines, and teachings that can be used in solving these different problems. In fact, it is precisely this openness to others that signifies just how compassionate he really is. Before teaching anything, says Vimalakirti, "first know the thoughts and inclinations of others."[32] This is an important point because it condemns those who begin with a theory or view or "truth" and then try to help others. It shows this approach as being backward in the sense that one does not help sentient beings without direct participation in their lives. Beginning with a fixed assumption that you already know what a person's problem is before directly engaging them entails a certain blindness to their context and to their specific problem. As Vimalakirti suggests, this can even be damaging. This is why he denounces those disciples and bodhisattvas who preach indiscriminately,

and is why he becomes angry with those who seem to think that the same Buddhist ideas will cure everyone equally.

What is interesting about Vimalakirti's own teaching style is that it does not begin with a conception of "truth" or an ontological view of the world. He starts with knowing the dispositions of others and understanding what their specific problems are, and then speaks "ontologically." His contact with others and his compassionate desire to help precedes any discourse on reality, and to ward off any misunderstanding he emphasizes that what he has just said is a "skilful mean." Thus, though he sometimes speaks ontologically, it is with the understanding that this particular world-view will help these particular people. This is illustrated by his discourse to the villagers on impermanence and suffering that was mentioned earlier in this chapter.

This should help us understand Vimalakirti's silence, as well as other important Buddhist doctrines which are spoken of in the sutra, such as *sunyata*, or emptiness. Ultimate truth is equated with emptiness in the Mahayana tradition, and this is sometimes interpreted by Buddhists as pointing to an ontology which can only be expressed with a "noble silence." As the sutra has the Buddha say in Chapter 11, however, the teachings about "illusion" "emptiness" and "silence" are only some of the many narrative "means" which can be used to facilitate spiritual growth. Attachment to any single teaching as "truth," however, can undermine one's ability to hear the needs and dispositions of others.

Summary

The main theme of the *Vimalakirti* sutra which I have tried to emphasize is that the major terms and categories which make up Buddhist philosophy, such as *sunyata*, the three "marks" of existence, and the theory of "two truths" are expressed less as descriptive

truths and more as symbolic terms, stories, and narratives that are specifically used in the context of religious transformation. The sutra cautions us against hypostacizing these terms because it works with the assumption, which I think is correct, that there are concrete differences in people's psychological make-up and dispositions toward life, differences that can only be understood by being grounded in the contexts in which those differences arise. Rather than developing a grand theory or universal explanation that could include all of these differences, the *Vimalakirti* simply asks us to be attentive to the needs of others, and to recognize a plurality of approaches which might be useful in order to benefit them.

Thinking of Buddhism ontologically, as describing a "truth" about the universe, is something which the *Vimalakirti* warns against because it sees this approach as doing more harm than good. It's not that those who think of Buddhism ontologically are thought to be inconsiderate of the needs of others (though the term "Hinayana" originally served this rhetorical function). On the contrary, the Abhidharmists, as well as many Buddhist scholars who see Buddhism as describing some underlying "truth" are all engaged in a sincere effort to help others. The insight that the *Vimalakirti* wants us to see, however, is that we are led astray when we begin thinking in terms of "truth," underlying causes, ontological structures, and metaphysical categories, because our perspective is then far removed from the concrete struggles of individuals. Being disconnected from others, we then lose sight of how to be compassionate.

The following chapters will continue this theme by looking at the thought of the Madhyamika thinker, Nagarjuna. The emphasis will be on how Nagarjuna's thought is conceived of primarily by philosophers, and how his texts are seen in "theoretical" terms. This will give us further examples of how the practice of *upaya* loses its significance once it is set against the quest for "truth."

NOTES

[1] *Saddharma-Pundarika or The Lotus of the True Law*, H. Kern, trans., *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. 21, (Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), p. 4-6.

[2] Nagarjuna, *Bodhisambhara(ka)*, Chr. Lindtner, trans., *Masters of Wisdom* (Dharma Publishing, 1986), p. 127-135.

[3] *Saddharma-Pundarika or The Lotus of the True Law*, H. Kern, trans., *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. 21, (Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), p. 285.

[4] Ibid., p 45-48.

[5] *Vimalakirtinirdesa.; The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti*, Robert Thurman, trans., (Penn State University Press, 1986), p. 77.

[6] Ibid., p. 77.

[7] See, for example, Murti, (1955).

[8] Pye, (1978), p. 84-101.

[9] *Vimalakirtinirdesha*, p. 20.

[10] Ibid., p. 22.

[11] Edward Conze, *Buddhism: its Essence and Development*, (Harper and Row, 1975), p. 47.

[12] *Samyutta-nikaya*, Burtt, trans., (1982), p. 30.

[13] *Vimalakirtinirdesa*, p. 22.

[14] Ibid., p. 22.

[15] *Samyuta-nikaya*, Conze, trans., (1954), p. 65.

[16] *Vimalakirtinirdesa*, p. 21.

[17] Ibid., p.43.

[18] Ibid., p. 64-65.

[19] Ibid., p. 51.

[20] Ibid., p. 28.

[21] Ibid., p. 28.

[22] Ibid., p. 29.

[23] Ibid., p. 82.

[24] Nagarjuna, *Madhyamikakarikas*, Ch XXIV, Garfield, trans., (1995), p. 68.

[25] *Vimalakirtinirdesa*, p. 22-23.

[26] Ibid., p. 82.

[27] Frederick Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Book 14, p. (translated by W. Kaufmann).

[28] Frederick Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, W. Kaufmann, trans., (Vintage Books, 1974), p. 341.

[29] Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, (Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 151.

[30] *Saddharma-Pundarika or The Lotus of the True Law*, H. Kern, trans., *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. 21, (Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), *Lotus Sutra*, Kern p. 39.

[31] ibid., p. 86.

[32] *Vimalakirtinirdesa*, p. 29.

CHAPTER V

THROUGH THE EYES OF THE WEST

Introduction

Nagarjuna is the second century founder of the Madhyamika, or "Middle Way" school of Buddhism in India. Very little is know about his actual life, though scholars agree that he lived in South of India and was born in a brahman family. More certain is the tremendous influence he has had on Mahayana Buddhism. His Madhyamika philosophy not only fueled prolific debates between Buddhists and non-Buddhists in India, but quickly spread to China, Tibet, and Japan, where it flourished as one of the greatest philosophical traditions that ever left India.

In the last few decades, Nagarjuna has also developed into one of the most prominent Buddhist philosophers for Western students of Buddhism. He is known as the key representative of Mahayana Buddhism, making him a significant figure in religious studies, and is considered by many to be one of the most philosophically rigorous of Buddhist thinkers. His most famous work, the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, for example, employs terse logical arguments against causality, change, motion, the self, space and time, and makes extensive use of the highly cryptic term, "emptiness." His reliance on *reductio ad absurdum* logic, and his attempt to express the Buddhist notion of "dependent origination" has thrust him into the spotlight for Western thinkers interested in Buddhist philosophy.

There is no consensus on what Nagarjuna's philosophy amounts to, however. He has been labeled a nihilist, an absolutist, a mystic, a skeptic, a Kantian, a Wittgensteinian, and a Derridean deconstructionist, to name only a few of his Western titles. The diversity of views which often contradict one another are due in part to his cryptic and terse writing style, as well as the fact that the main points of his arguments are often suppressed, making it extremely difficult to pin him down.

This diversity of opinions is not just Western, however. In India, Nagarjuna's Madhyamika school quickly broke into two main sects, the Prasangika and the Svatantrika. In China, Japan, and Tibet, there are numerous interpretations of Madhyamika thought, testifying to the fact that even though Nagarjuna has been historically influential, there is no single view about what his philosophy amounts to.

Given the vast landscape of Nagarjuna scholarship, I must limit this study in two significant ways. First, I will focus primarily on Western interpretations of Nagarjuna. Though this is no doubt a serious limitation, the scholarship that has developed in the West around Nagarjuna is an entire body of literature itself, and is thus worthy of philosophical exploration in its own right. This does not mean that I will refrain from acknowledging non-Western sources, however, as many Nagarjuna scholars in the West see themselves as coming from Indian, Tibetan, and Zen perspectives. Rather, it means that this study will not emphasize the historical development of the Madhyamika tradition through the Indian, Chinese, and Tibetan sources.[1]

The second limitation of this study is to concentrate on a few of the most significant themes in Nagarjuna's philosophy. Nagarjuna covers enormous conceptual ground and takes up practically every topic in Buddhist and non-Buddhist philosophy. There are nevertheless core ideas that hold his works together, and is also what Western scholars find most significant. Two important ideas that will I will highlight are Nagarjuna's views

regarding causality and language. Both are central to Buddhist thought, and will provide us with clear examples of how different thinkers interpret Madhyamika philosophy.

For the purpose of this study, I will divide the debates surrounding Nagarjuna into three major positions: 1. those who see Nagarjuna as nihilist, denying the efficacy of language and causality on an empirical level, as well as any ultimate truth beyond the empirical; 2. those who see Nagarjuna as a type of mystic who, though denying causality and language at the empirical level, posits some higher truth beyond our everyday world; and 3. those who see Nagarjuna neither as a nihilist nor mystic, but as a type of conventionalist who only denies that words and casual connections have any objective validity, but shows them to be "conventionally" true.[2]

My position in these debates will fall more in line with the third group than the first two. I see Nagarjuna neither as a nihilist nor a mystic, who neither negates the world altogether nor establishes some "ultimate" truth to be accessed by a mystic's intuition. What I take to be the strength of the "conventionalist" reading is that it traverses a middle position between the two extremes of nihilism and absolutism. Instead of viewing his thought as an attempt to demolish all possible world-views, or, on the other hand, as a mystical longing for some ineffable realm, the conventionalist views Nagarjuna as attacking the need to define the world in reductive and essentialistic terms. It asserts that it is mainly our theories about the world, and the tendency to reify certain aspects of it, that Nagarjuna's philosophy attempts to address. The conventionalist sees Nagarjuna as critiquing the reification of theories by arguing that all theories, view, propositions, and assertions are only "conventional" designations with no reference to an "objective," or ontologically value-free world.

While aligning myself with this third position, however, I will also argue that it does not give a full picture of Nagarjuna. It tends to diminish his role as a Mahayana

Buddhist, and thus treats his views in a type of religious, philosophical, and historical vacuum. I will offer these criticisms in the final section of this chapter, and explore them in more detail in the following chapter.

Nagarjuna as Nihilist

The prevailing view of Buddhism when Western scholars first began studying its texts in the nineteenth century was that it promoted world-resignation and pessimism. The French scholar, Eugene Burnouf, one of the first scholars to translate the *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras, described the Buddhist goal as "annihilation," "extinction," and "nihilism." He argued that the Buddha's philosophy failed to discover anything but an empty void behind the shifting flux of appearances, and said that nirvana signifies the complete extinction of individuality through a descent into nothingness. As Bornouf's student, Max Muller, once wrote:

> No person who reads with attention the metaphysical speculations of Nirvana contained in the Buddhist canon can arrive at any conviction different from that expressed by Burnouf, *viz.* that Nirvana, the highest aim, the *summum bonum* of Buddhism, is the absolute nothing.[3]

In the first decades of this century, Louis de La Vallee Poussin refined Burnouf's thesis by limiting Buddhist nihilism to only one tradition, the Madhyamika. According to La Valle Poussin, who translated both Nagarjuna's *Mulamadhyamakakarika* and Candrakirti's *Prasannapada*, the Madhyamika system is an extreme position in the history of Buddhism, a heterodoxy which seriously departs from the general trend of Buddhist thought. The goal of "genuine" Buddhism, as he argued, is not world negating or nihilistic, but expresses a state of perfect bliss in which an immortal soul passes from this world into an eternal paradise. The Madhyamikas, on the other hand, were "pure nihilists" who denied

both an immortal soul and an eternal realm, and were therefore a radical subgroup in Buddhist philosophical and religious history.[4]

We should be clear on the type of nihilism which La Valle Poussin and others ascribe to Nagarjuna. In this context, Madhyamika nihilism is not a claim about skepticism. These thinkers do not see Nagarjuna as saying that it is impossible to rationally justify certain epistemological or ontological views of the world. Nagarjuna is thus quite different from the skeptical position of someone like Sextus Empiricus, who urged a "suspension of belief" in the face of philosophical claims. His nihilism is also not like the Nietzschean claim that our moral values are "life-negating" and bankrupt, or the type of nihilism that some people think ensues after God and moral foundations have been deconstructed. Rather, Nagarjuna's nihilism comes closer to what many Greek philosophers took the sophist Gorgias to mean when he said that "nothing exists." Gorgias' reason for saying this was to point out the inconsistency in the philosophical use of the word "existence." That is, he said that if something exists it must either come from non-being, which he thought was impossible, or from eternity, which he also thought was impossible. Therefore, he said, "nothing exists." Gorgias was trying to make *reductio* arguments on certain positive philosophical positions regarding existence, but his claim that "nothing exists" was itself taken by Greek philosophers as a proposition about the nature of reality, i.e., that it is impossible for anything whatsoever to exist.

Nagarjuna's Madhyamika position is accepted by thinkers like La Valle Poussin as similar to what the sophist supposedly meant when they said that 'nothing exists.' These Nagarjuna scholars view the Madhyamika arguments against causality, the self, time, space, and motion, to be attacks against the possibility of anything existing in causal relations, moving through time, or changing. It is thus not the type skepticism which refuses to take a philosophical position since it has doubts regarding our ability to justify

epistemological, moral, and ontological claims. Rather, Nagarjuna is viewed as adopting the more radical position of denying existence altogether.

This characterization of Nagarjuna and his followers as nihilists was only until recently viewed by most Madhayamika scholars as fallacious. Beginning with Stcherbatsky, Buddhist writers repeatedly condemned the nihilist approach of writers like Burnouf and La Valle Poussin, stressing that only those who are committed to the religious and philosophical foundations of Western thought would label the Madhyamika tradition "nihilistic."

Thomas Wood's recent book *Nagarjunian Disputations*, however, revives the nihilistic interpretation. According to Wood, Madhyamika thought is nihilistic, pure and simple.

> For the Madhyamikas, emptiness (sunyata) was not a thing, process or property--not even a transcendent thing, process or property. It was exactly what the Sanskrit words "sunya" and "sunyata" suggest that it was. Like empty space, like the self or soul of the ordinary man and the non-Buddhist philosopher, like an illusion, a dream or an illusory city in the sky, like a magical creation, like a mirage, like an hallucination which does not exist even as a mental phenomenon...it was simply sheer, unqualified, absolute nothingness.[5]

The attempt to cover up the explicit nihilistic agenda of the Madhayamika is not only historically wrong, according to Wood, but is simply an attempt to make the Madhyamika more digestible to Western students. For example, Wood argues that it is no mistake that for over fifteen hundred years the prevailing view of Madhyamika philosophy in India has been that they were nihilists. Buddhists and non-Buddhist traditions alike repeatedly characterized the Madhyamikas as nihilists, and it therefore distorts the position of the Madhyamika philosophers to conceal this point. Rather than covering up what appears to be an "extreme" view, we should accept the nihilism which these thinkers promote since, as Wood says, "they were perhaps the most radical philosophers that have ever lived."[6]

Wood bases his nihilistic interpretation of the Madhyamika primarily on a reading of Nagarjuna's *Mulamadhyamakakarika.* When Nagarjuna says, for example, that all things are unreal, that reality is "empty," that nirvana is the cessation of all arising and ceasing, and that nothing in samsara can be established as real, we should read him literally on these points. "Nothing is real" according to Wood's reading of Nagarjuna, "not even what we call mind. Everything is just smoke and mirrors, all the way down--and ultimately, even the smoke and mirrors are non-existent!"[7] Hence, when Nagarjuna says that everything is "empty" we should take him as saying just that.

To give a sense of how Wood's thesis works, let me give a few examples of how he reads key passages from Nagarjuna's texts. In the dedication verse of the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, for example, Nagarjuna says:

> I salute him, the fully enlightened, the best of speakers, who preached the non-ceasing and the non-arising, the non-annihilation and the non-permanence, the non-identity and the non-difference, the non-appearance and the non-disappearance, the dependent arising, the appeasement of obsessions and the auspicious.

Woods reading of this passage is to say that it refers to the absolute non-production of existence, since what is not produced cannot arise or cease, appear or disappear, etc. That is, since nothing exists, then it obviously follows that there are no entities arising, ceasing, producing or appearing. This conclusion is the result of taking Nagarjuna's dialectical arguments to their completion and, as Wood says, applying them, like the Madhyamika does, to the empirical world.

The Madhyamika dialectic consists of a series of negative responses to four possible alternatives. It is called the *catuskoti* and has the following form:

1. It is not the case that x is ø.
2. It is not the case that x is not-ø.
3. It is not the case that x is both ø and not-ø.
4. It is not the case that x is neither ø nor not-ø.

Thus, if we take the case of production above, the *catuskoti* involves the following four negations:

1. It is not the case that existence is produced.
2. It is not the case that existence is not-produced.
3. It is not the case that existence is both produced and not-produced.
4. It is not the case that existence is neither produced nor non-produced.

The four alternatives supposedly cover all possible avenues one could take regarding the production of things in existence. An explanation of all four would look something like the following:

1. *It is not the case that existence is produced.* Existence is not produced because for something to be produced it must be derived from one of two possibilities: being or not-being. If it comes from being then there is a contradiction involved, since being is by definition (at least according to the Buddhists) unchanging and uncaused. Hence, how could something which itself does not change or exist in causal relationships create or cause other things? Likewise, things cannot come from non-being, since how can non-existence produce or cause other things to come into existence? Therefore, this first alternative is unacceptable.

2. *It is not the case that existence is not-produced.* But this does not mean that existence is not-produced either, since if something exists it must have been produced at some time. Our everyday experience seems to tell us that things exist, that there are trees, cars, people, animals, and houses. To say that nothing is produced means that these things

have always existed in their present state, which is obviously absurd. Therefore, like the first position, this one is rejected as well.

3. *It is not the case that existence is both produced and not-produced.* Trying to combine 1 and 2 by saying that things are both produced and non-produced is not only a patent contradiction ($x = \emptyset$ and *not* ($x = \emptyset$)), but simply multiplies the problems inherent in positions 1 and 2. Hence, the problem would be not only one of determining how something can be both produced and not-produced at the same time, which is logically impossible, but of determining which parts of a thing are produced and which parts are non-produced, and what type of relations these two aspects can have in the same entity. But, again, how can something non-produced have any relationship with something which is produced. As this position is but a combination of the first two rejected positions, it too is denied.

4. *It is not the case that existence is neither produced nor non-produced.* This leaves the last alternative, which basically says that it is a mistake to use the word "production" when we speak of created entities. If this were true, however, we could never speak meaningfully about produced things, like the birth of a child or the creation of beautiful works of art. The fact that our speech about production is not meaningless, however, and that we immediately grasp the absurdity in certain phrases which use ideas of production, like "the child was born before conception," shows that this fourth position is mistaken and, as with the first three, is rejected as unacceptable.

In the *Mulamadyamakakarika*, Nagarjuna uses the *catuskoti* against certain philosophical positions regarding existence, such as causality, space, time, motion,

change, consciousness, and so on, and tries to reveal the absurdity in every conceivable position regarding these views by appealing to the four alternatives of the *catuskoti*.

Wood's interpretation of Nagarjuna's use of the *catuskoti* is to say that all four alternatives are rejected because Nagarjuna did not believe that anything exists. That is, Nagarjuna denies that x is ø and that x is non-ø etc. because for him there were no x's. Existence is not produced nor not-produced because there is no such thing as existence in the first place. Nagarjuna is thus not a mere skeptic who seeks to counter by *reductio* arguments the views of others, but has one position which his *catuskoti* seeks to prove. As Wood says,

> It is clear that Nagarjuna did accept and indeed very much wanted to prove at least one proposition, i.e., that things do *not* originate at all."[8]

For Wood, when Nagarjuna says that there is "no arising, no ceasing. . .no appearance and no disappearance" he is establishing his position not only against what orthodox Buddhism had always accepts as real (the temporary flux of *dharmas*), but against the only type of reality that is conceivable to Nagarjuna. Hence, the Abhidharma tradition denied the reality of the aggregates of existence (*skandhas*) and insisted that only *dharmas* exist as the bare units of reality, held together by the laws of dependent-origination. Nagarjuna accepted the Abhidharma denial of the aggregates, but extended his critique to include the *dharmas* as well. Hence, not only are the aggregates "empty" of substance, but so too are the *dharmic* units which supposedly give rise to the idea of aggregates. If *dharmas* are non-existent, then so too is the causal process which is supposed to hold them together, and there is therefore no such thing as arising, ceasing, appearing or disappearing. What is interesting in Wood's analysis is that, for Nagarjuna,

there is no other conceivable reality except what the Abhidharma tradition upheld, and by denying it, Nagarjuna denies everything.

The first stanza of Nagarjuna's *Karikas*, for example, exemplifies for Wood the Madhyamika denial of causality, which amounts to an outright denial of existence. Nagarjuna says:

> Neither from itself nor from another,
> Nor from both,
> Nor without a cause,
> Does anything whatever, anywhere arise.

Wood is not clear on the reasons why Nagarjuna says that nothing arises from itself, from others, from both, or without a cause, which is the argument against causality. Nevertheless, he thinks that by denying causality Nagarjuna denies existence altogether. Nagarjuna's arguments against space, time, and motion, which appear in later chapters, are likewise not just arguments against *certain* conceptions of space, time, and motion, but against any and all conceptions of space, time, and motion, or at least any that were conceivable to Nagarjuna. Thus, Nagarjuna was an outright nihilist.

It should be noted that Wood bases his analysis on a certain reading of the "two truths." When Nagarjuna says, for example, that according to ultimate truth all things are empty he is stating a negative proposition about the nature of reality: he is saying, according to Wood, that ultimately nothing exists--and this is, paradoxically, the ultimate truth of things. Hence, what is considered "conventional" is simply false, a mere teaching for those too ignorant to understand the "radical" teachings of absolute emptiness.

> The Madhyamikas themselves appear to have believed that it is simply *false* that things originate. The ultimate truth--and therefore the only truth--is that things do not originate at all, i.e., they are completely void (sunya) and non-existent (asat)...there are no plants, electrons, dharmas etc. that arise in a real causal process. And this doctrine--at least when interpreted very strictly, as it was in the Madhyamika--is the *nihilist* position.[9]

According to Wood, the "two truths" are really about two different types of teachings. Conventional truth describes things as arising and ceasing, as produced and not-produced, as caused and un-caused. According to the "ultimate truth," however, this is simply false. All things are absolutely non-existent, there is no production, no arising, no time, no movement, and, from "ultimate" perspective, not even something called "emptiness." It too is "empty," which means that upon analysis, and according to the "ultimate truth," nothing can be discovered bearing the characteristics of something called "emptiness." Conventional truth is therefore a *false* teaching, for Wood, while "ultimate truth" teaches things as they really are: sheer nothingness.

Wood's nihilistic reading of Nagarjuna stands alone in the contemporary debates. As far as I know, no Madhyamika scholar since La Valle Poussin has seriously proposed this thesis. The nihilistic view of Madhyamika that arose in the early part of this century was attacked by Buddhist scholars from every direction, and it seemed dead until Wood revived it. In this respect, his interpretation is quite novel.

Nagarjuna as Mystic

The second group of Nagarjuna scholars I wish to discuss will be grouped under the general heading, "mysticism." In its traditional sense, mysticism usually denotes a certain relation with a divine being, or a religious experience connected with God. None of the thinkers I wish to discuss view Nagarjuna in this way, and so are not "mystical" in this sense. On the other hand, mysticism can also refer to a certain view regarding a transcendental experience, or a view which says that the only way to attain "truth" is to rise above all philosophical categories, logical assertions, common-sense perceptions, and the everyday use of words. This type of mystical experience is said to be accessible through

some type of non-mediated experience, or a special form of intuition that arises only after one has transcended the use of language and logic. This type of "mysticism" is easily found in reference to Nagarjuna.

The mystical strain of Nagarjuna scholarship has different views regarding the nature of Madhyamika thought. Depending on the writer, Nagarjuna can be seen as a monist, an idealist, or an absolutist, to name only a few. What many of these writers share, however, is a view which puts Nagarjuna in the position of deconstructing our everyday experience so that we can attain a "higher" truth which is utterly ineffable and inaccessible to rational thought. In this sense, the writers of this section see Nagarjuna as a mystic.

Most thinkers who interpret Nagarjuna as "mystical" seem to follow Candrakirti's view that the causal world is a product of language, and that language "covers up" or "conceals" the true nature of reality. Hence, by dissolving the inherent limitations that language imposes on the world, which amounts to a deconstruction of causality, space, time, the self, and so on, one is able to experience freedom. As Candrakirti says in his commentary on the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*:

> When dependent origination is seen by the wise as it truly is because the manifold of named things (*prapanca*)--the duality of name and what is named, and so on--has ceased utterly, the manifold of named things comes to rest in it. Nagarjuna holds that dependent origination is nothing else but the coming to rest of the manifold of named things. When the everyday mind and its contents are no longer active, the subject and object of everyday transactions having faded out because the turmoil of origination, decay, and death has been left behind completely, that is final beatitude.[10]

Candrakirti makes the connection here between causality (dependent origination) and *prapanca*, the "manifold of named things." Causality arises due to the inherent duality of name and what is named, subject and object, etc., which not only "conceals" the nature of phenomena, but creates havoc and turmoil in our everyday lives. Hence, by

deconstructing causality and the linguistic structure which supports it, one achieves liberation. "By this rejection," says Candrakirti, "the true delusive everyday nature of delusive everyday things is revealed as it really is." That is, through an analysis of causality our everyday experience is shown to be delusive, and this delusion is the result of linguistic habits. Hence, by deconstructing language one comes to experience the "coming to rest of named things"--i.e., *nirvana*. Language, causality, and our everyday, common-sense world are therefore all united in Candrakirti's thought, and must be rejected on the grounds that they "conceal" the true nature of things.

This connection between language, causality, and our everyday world should be kept in mind as we move through this section, as all the "mystical" interpreters see them as inseparable.

This "mystical" strain of Nagarjuna scholarship developed in direct conflict with the nihilistic interpretation. Stcherbatsky was the first to counter the view of La Valle Poussin, whose views, said Stcherbatsky, revealed more about what La Valle Poussin wants Buddhism to be than what it really is. Stcherbatsky agreed with one aspect of the nihilistic interpretation, i.e., that the Madhyamika dialectic deconstructs the phenomenal world of space, time, and causation, and shows it to be nothing other than illusion. According to Stcherbatsky, however, this is only the first step in the dialectic. The other, much more important step, comes after the realization that the phenomenal world is an illusion. For Stcherbatsky, the next step is when the "mystic intuition of the (Buddhist) saint" experiences a "monistic universe" where everything is still and noumenally quiet. The first step of Nagarjuna's dialectic denies empirical reality by showing that it is impossible for independent *dharmas* to be connected causally and through time. But it then points to a true reality that exists without motion, change, or causal distortion: absolutely One and indistinguishable. In other words, even though Nagarjuna denies the phenomenal world of

causation, space, time, etc., he does so from the perspective of a "true" reality that exists without the characteristics which the mind imposes on it. This "true" reality, as Stcherbatsky sees it, is what the Madhyamikas mean by *nirvana.*[11]

For Stcherbatsky, a nihilistic interpretation of Nagarjuna is possible only by remaining within the purely negative aspect of the dialectic. The negations of the *catuskoti*, as we saw, are meant to deny all possible claims about the phenomenal world. But what it denies is only *false* appearance, according to Stcherbatsky. Cause and effect, space and time, and the multiplicity of appearances are what the *catuskoti* refute, and not the reality of *nirvana*, which in itself must be uncaused, unchanging, and undifferentiated.

Stcherbatsky's Nagarjuna is thus an interesting mixture of Kant and Sankara. As he says:

> To characterize Nagarjuna as a "nihilist" means to make a misleading comparison, since his condemnation of logic is only one part, and not the principle one, of this philosophy...Upon the Indian side we must first of all point to the almost absolute identity with Vedanta...it follows from this identity that all the points of contact which Prof. Deussen has really found, or imagined to have found, between Schopenhaeur and Vedanta, will equally apply to Nagarjuna.[12]

Stcherbatsky's chief follower, T. R. V. Murti, also interpreted Nagarjuna through a Kantian/Vedantin lens. For Murti, as for Stcherbatsky, reality is fundamentally One and undifferentiated--but is hidden behind a veil of illusion and obscured by rational thought. The force of Nagarjuna's dialectic, the *catuskoti*, reveals the workings of this illusion, which operates by projecting conceptual and rational categories upon that which is eternally free and non-conceptual.

For Murti, the dialectic works by revealing the internal contradictions in any form of conceptual thought that attempts to understand reality. Any attempt to conceptualize the "Real", says Murti--as either Being, Non-Being, Both, or Neither--is brought to its self-

contradictory conclusion by a series of *reductio* arguments, revealed as a mere attempt to grasp through logic that which defies all categories, and then rejected for the purpose of attaining the "highest" truth of *Sunyata* . "The Madhyamika denies metaphysics," according to Murti, "not because there is no real for him; but because it is inaccessible to Reason. He is convinced of a Higher faculty, Intuition (prajna) with which the Real (tattva) is identical."[13]

For Murti, Nagarjuna's dialectic should not be viewed as a Hegelian spiral that leads to higher and higher conceptual levels. Rather, it is the "conflict of Reason" itself, which is resolved not by attaining another theoretical standpoint, but by transcending all standpoints.

> The Dialectic is not a body of doctrines, but their criticism. Philosophy for the Madhyamika, is not an explanation of things through conceptual patterns. That is the way of dogmatic speculation (drsti); but this does not give us the truth. The Dialectic is intended as an effective antidote for this dogmatic procedure of reason; it is the criticism of theories...As the Madhyamika dialectic relentlessly exposes the falsity of every philosophical view, each of which pretends to give a complete and only picture of all things, it curbs the speculative disposition of dogmatic Reason. It is a reversal of the natural process of looking at things through set ideas, the disabusing of the mind of *a priori* notions which are the mainsprings of our empirical ways of life.[14]

As with Stcherbatsky, Murti thinks that a nihilistic interpretation of Nagarjuna is naive, and results from not seeing the motivating force behind the dialectical negation of phenomena. The point is not simply to negate the world of space, time, and causality, as a philosophical game. Rather, the empirical world is negated for soteriological reasons. Phenomenal experience is revealed as *false* appearance, which for Murti presupposes the necessity of a "higher" truth which can be attained by transcendence, and this transcendence is peace, liberation from suffering, and absolute truth.

As is evident, the common view among most "mystical" Nagarjuna scholars is a reading of the "two truths" which refers to a distinction between a noumenal and phenomenal realm. While La Valle Poussin, Wood, and other nihilistic interpreters see Nagarjuna as deconstructing both sides of the "two truths" (absolute/conventional or noumenal/phenomenal) distinction, hence showing reality to be absolutely nothing, the "mystical" interpreters see the "two truths" as distinct levels of reality. Our common, everyday world, immersed in conceptual distortions and causal networks, is simply "conventional," and therefore false, while "ultimate truth" reveals the world in its pristine "suchness"--unmediated and conceptually free. The distinction is therefore ontological for the "mystics," with our common-sense world occupying a lower, illusory status.

Another common assumption among these thinkers is that our "conventional," everyday experience rests upon a mistaken view of both language and causality. The thrust of Nagarjuna's philosophy, for these thinkers, is to get us see that our day-to-day lives are infected with linguistic dualities that trick us into believing that there really are entities existing in causal relations. In their view, Language splits the world into distinct subject-object entities which seem to have relations with other things, but Nagarjuna's dialectic reveals that there are no distinct entities, no subjects, no objects, and hence no causal relations between them. The entire network of everyday life therefore rests on a linguistic structure which must be transcended if one wants to experience truth.

David Loy, for example, says that Nagarjuna is not simply attacking particular metaphysical theories, such as found in the Indian Abhidharma, Nyaya, or Vedanta traditions. Rather, he is critiquing the general experience of the common person on the street.

> In order to understand the Madhyamika critique, we must begin with a clear sense of what it is that is being criticized. This is our common-sense understanding of the

> world, which sees it as a collection of discrete entities (including myself) interacting causally "in" space and time. Just as space and time, if they are to function as "containers," require something understood as nonspatial and nontemporal to "contain," so the causal relation is normally used to explain the interaction between things which are distinct from each other. Nagarjuna attacks more that the philosophical fancies of Indian metaphysicians, for there is a metaphysics inherent in our common-sense view. This common-sense understanding...is what makes the everyday world *samsara* for us, and it is this *samsara* that Nagarjuna is concerned to "deconstruct."[15]

That there is an underlying metaphysics to our everyday experiences is what makes Nagarjuna a powerful religious figure for these thinkers, as opposed to a mere "philosopher." Nagarjuna is not simply theorizing about the nature of the universe or criticizing abstract philosophical claims--but revealing the implicit contradiction in our daily attitudes, perceptions, and activities, which he then hopes to "deconstruct" so that we can go beyond language, as Harold Coward says, "into immediate experience in which no subject-object duality is present."[16]

What is the nature of this "everyday metaphysics"? The argument against our common sense way of taking things usually takes the form of saying, as Loy did above, that we perceive the world as a collection of discrete things interacting causally in space and time, which, upon analysis, reveals a contradiction. For, when we analyze things, say a tree, or a desk, or a person, we find that it exists only in relation to other things, or that its identity is dependent upon the conditions which make it up. Thus, a tree is dependent on the air, the soil, the water, and cannot exist as an independent entity apart from these conditions. Just as a tree has no identity or self-nature apart from its causal conditions, so all things are said to exist in the same way, that is, as conditioned phenomena with no independent nature. Our perceptions of discrete entities are therefore fallacious, since we can easily dissolve all things into the network of conditions that make it up.

There is an implicit contradiction in this view, however, because our understanding of causality requires discrete entities interacting "in" space and time for the process of cause

and effect to get off the ground. That is, causality requires "things" to be caused and "things" to be effected, otherwise there can be no causality. Our perception of discrete entities and our views regarding causality presuppose one another, and, hence, stand and fall together. By deconstructing one side, the other must go as well. Murti expresses this point in the following way:

> Relation has to perform two mutually opposed functions: as *connecting* the two terms, in making them relevant to each other, it has to *identify* them; but as connecting the *two*, it has to *differentiate* them. Otherwise expressed, relation cannot obtain between entities that are identical with or different from each other.[17]

This argument is trying to get us to see an inherent contradiction in our perceptions and views regarding causation. By definition, causation is something relational: entities exist in causal relationships are not things-in-themselves, they cannot exist independently from that which defines them. A cause is related to the effect just as an effect is related to the cause: neither exists in isolation from the other. However, our understanding of this very relationship is "dualistic" since it presupposes the identity of distinct "things" (subject and object, cause and effect) which come together to form a connection. Thus, even though there are no independent "things" in the causal process, our understanding of causality requires such "things" to make sense. This contradiction then leads to the view that causation is the result of a subjective fallacy, a "superimposition" onto what is otherwise non-causal, non-dual, and non-conceptual substratum: i.e., Absolute Reality. As Murti says:

> These insuperable difficulties impel us to the conclusion that cause and effect, substance and attribute, whole and parts, subject and object etc., are mutually dependent, relative; hence they are not things-in-themselves.
> What is relative is subjective, unreal. The categories (of thought) are so many conceptual devices (vikalpa, prapanca) by which Reason tries to apprehend the Real that cannot be categorized and made relative. Reason (buddhi) is therefore

condemned as falsifying the real. No phenomenon, no object of knowledge, escapes this universal relativity.[18]

Supporters of this view take Nagarjuna's critique of causality and motion to be paramount to understanding his entire project. In the first stanza of the *Karikas*, for example, which was already quoted above, Nagarjuna states the following:

Neither from itself nor from another,
Nor from both,
Nor without a cause,
Does anything whatever, anywhere arise.

This is the beginning of Nagarjuna's attack on causality, an attack that the "mystical" interpreters who follow Candrakirti say leads to the conclusion that the "manifold of named things" is merely *prapanca*, the "covering" or "distortion" of reality. If there are self-existent entities, they must have arisen either from themselves, from something else, from both, or from no cause whatsoever. Nagarjuna denies all four alternatives, thus supposedly showing that the entire conception of causality is mistaken.

He does this by saying that any understanding of cause and effect relations can be reduced to either asserting or denying their identity. In other words, a cause is either identical to its effect, different from its effect, both, or neither. Saying they are identical is absurd, as it destroys the language of cause and effect which presupposes that something has *changed*, or has become different from what it once was. But if cause and effect are identical, there is no change in status from the cause to the effect. Therefore, Nagarjuna says that nothing can arise from itself. As Murti says:

Absolute identity is not even assertible. Even to affirm A is A, we have to take the help of difference of time, place, and circumstances of A's occurrences, etc....Identity militates against causation. Propositions true of the effect (of the pitcher as holding water etc.) are not truth of the cause (clay). Either the cause is not

> identical with the effect, or if identity is insisted upon, causation must be given up.[19]

Does this mean that cause and effect is a relation between two different entities (arising from another)? Nagarjuna denies this alternative saying that it is logically impossible for two separate entities to be causally related, since their status as two different entities excludes the necessary continuity that must adhere between conditioned phenomena. Just as a theory of causal identity denies the necessary relationship between cause and effect, so insistence upon difference leads to a complete rupture between two things that are supposed to be related. This thesis, according to Nagarjuna, must be denied, as it undercuts the meaning of causal language. "Perfect otherness (or difference)," says Candrakirti, "amounts to no cause at all."[20]

This leaves the last two alternatives, which are also denied by Nagarjuna, the first for being contradictory, and the second for not making logical sense. Saying that cause and effect are both identical and non-identical is a basic contradiction: $x = \emptyset$ and *not* $(x = \emptyset)$. And saying that a cause arises from nowhere is not only logically impossible (how can a non-cause bring something into existence?), but implies that things can arise from any source whatsoever. As Buddhapalita says:

> Things cannot arise without a cause, because that would entail that anything could arise at any time, anywhere.[21]

The upshot of this for the "mystical" reading of Nagarjuna is to say that because all four alternatives lead to contradictions, they must be negated. But a denial of causality is not simply a denial of a particular theory of cause and effect--for, as Loy said above, "it is our lives, and not just our theories, which are inconsistent in 'taking' the world as a collection of discrete 'self-existing' things which yet change." [22] The "mystical" interpreter

thus sees Nagarjuna as attacking the very foundations of common-sense experience, which relies on seeing the world in a causal way.

What fuels this causal view, however, is language, since for the "mystic" the distinction between subject and object is embedded in linguistic use, and as long as we rely on language we are therefore committed to reifying the distinction between cause and effect. As Loy says in two different places:

> Language, in order to describe at all, must dualize between subject and predicate, mover and moved, cause and effect.[23]
>
> Nagarjuna agrees that such dualities are ineluctably inscribed in language, and thus are fundamental categories of thought; this means, however, not that they are inescapable, but that their deconstruction points finally to an experience beyond language.[24]

Loy's comments highlight the differences between the "nihilistic" and "mystical" interpretations of Nagarjuna. Both agree that Nagarjuna deconstructs our "conventional" notions of causality, and both see him as saying that causality is the result of the "dualities" inherent in linguistic use. Where they differ, however, is that the "mystic" sees Nagarjuna as trying to get past language for a transcendental truth, whereas the nihilist sees him as denying everything, including some ineffable experience.

The mystic is pushed even further away from the nihilist by the connection it makes between Vedanta and Madhyamika traditions. As is well known, the Vedantin is no nihilist; he affirms reality as pure Being, Consciousness, and Bliss (*sat-citt-ananda*), and tells us that no conceptual discriminations will ever approach reality in its unmanifest aspect (*nirguna Brahman*). Though the Madhyamikin and Vedantin differ in many respects, they nevertheless share a view which sees Reality as untainted by conceptual, linguistic, or rational dichotomies. The "Real is the Absolute," says Murti, which for him means that

reality is completely "void" of every possible distinction we could ever hope to grasp it with. Nevertheless, the Absolute is not an illusion--it is Real--and is implied in our very use of dichotomous thinking. Just as when in the evening we may mistake a rope for snake, so the famous Indian analogy goes, the rope (reality) must be there for us to superimpose "snake" (illusion) onto the rope in the first place. It is this underlying reality that both the Madhyamikin and Vedantin are trying to show us in their deconstruction of all thought categories. Hence, far from being nihilistic, Nagarjuna is simply reaffirming in a different way an underlying truth which can only be attained in a non-rational, non-linguistic, and non-conceptual way.

Nagarjuna as Anti-Metaphysician

As with the first two positions, what I am calling the "conventionalist" reading of Nagarjuna includes a variety of thinkers, many of whom disagree on the exact nature of Madhyamika thought. Some see Nagarjuna as a skeptic (Matilal), while others see him as a type of pragmatic empiricist (Kalupahana), a Wittgensteinian (Streng, Katz, and Gudmunsen), a nominalist (Garfield), an anti-realist (Siderits), and a pseudo post-structuralist (Huntington). Though these differences are obviously great, there are a number of "family resemblances" which these thinkers share, and which for the purpose of this study will allow us to address them in a common vein. The shared features of these thinkers can be divided into three general points about the aim of Madhyamika philosophy:

1. *Madhyamika is anti-metaphysical.* Against the "mystical" reading of Nagarjuna given by thinkers such as Stcherbatsky, Murti, and Loy, the "conventionalist" views Madhyamika thought as philosophically hostile to metaphysics. Rather than pointing *via negativa* to an absolute ground behind a veil of appearances, or demolishing logic and

reason for an ineffable experience, Nagarjuna seeks to dissolve the urge to search for metaphysical principles, ideas, experiences, or concepts in the first place. The doctrine of *sunyata* counters the philosophical penchant for absolute justification, and rejects the tendency to isolate certain aspects of experience, like consciousness, as independently valid or in any way privileged. To say that the world is "empty" does not mean for the "conventionalist" that it lacks meaning, or that it is nothing, and neither does it means that "truth" should be discovered in some transcendental experience that stands over and above the illusory phenomena of "this" world. Rather, to say that the world is "empty" means that it lacks any absolute ontological or epistemic grounding. It is "empty" of the categories and terms which philosophers use to justify their principles, and "empty" of those theories which seek universal validity. Rather than grounding our world view in an objective substratum, "emptiness" dissipates the need to construct theoretical maps, quenches the desire to search for underlying causes and first principles, and dissolves the urge to reify our views as foundational. For the "conventionalist," *sunyata* is fundamentally a critique of every form of essentialism.

2. *Madhyamika has no "view."* Connected with the anti-metaphysical reading of Nagarjuna, the "conventionalist" says that Madhyamika has no essentialistic view to offer. The term “essentialism” is used differently by the writers I am labeling “conventionalist,” and for the purpose of this study we will take it to mean any view, theory, or philosophical principle which seeks a neutral, objective, independent, or privileged ground. Thus, a substance view of causality which conceives relationships in terms of an underlying substance is “essentialistic,” as is a view which posits consciousness as an independent and self-functioning entity, or a rational explanation of the world which makes sense of phenomena in terms of pre-established, logical criteria. All of these views are seen by these

writers as "essentialistic" since they are attempts to reify some aspect of experience (substances, consciousness, rational thought) as independently valid or naturally self-evident.

Because the "conventionalist" sees the problems of existence stemming from essentialistic thinking, the Madhyamikin does not offer another "view" in place of those he refutes. Hence, "emptiness" is not another theory, but the deconstruction of theory. "For him who takes emptiness to be a view" says Nagarjuna, "there is no cure." Instead of referring to an "empty" nothingness or some absolute transcendental truth, "emptiness" is self-referential: it bites its own tail and establishes no new foundational view of reality: it too is "empty." Hence, the commonly asserted standpoint of Madhyamika philosophy, which turns out to be no "standpoint" at all--is called the "emptiness of emptiness."

"Emptiness" is thus the critique of all those theories, views, and philosophical principles which suffer from essentialism, but unlike Murti and the other "mystical" interpreters, the "conventionalists" do not see the Madhyamikin as deconstructing "theory" for the purpose of rising to some higher ultimate truth. For the "conventionalist," the Madhyamika erects no new absolute once all "views" have been deconstructed; he simply deconstructs "views" without putting any other absolute in its place.

3. *Madhyamika reveals the conventional nature of meaning and truth.* Instead of viewing language and conceptual categories as referring to something objective or extra-linguistic, the Madhyamika reveals that all of our practices, ethical norms, philosophical vocabularies, and linguistic habits are conventional designations. Nothing can be established as objective or ultimately "true," since truth only has meaning within a vast network of social and cultural practices. Instead of searching for meaning in relation to some objective or absolutely valid world, or seeking for an ultimate truth independent of

our conventional practices, we should be sensitive to the fact that the real problems in life arise "when language goes on holiday"--or when we think that our words refer to something more than their practical, everyday use. The nature of the conventional varies depending on the thinker, but is commonly used in opposition to any view which sees truth as something objective or essential.[25]

What many of these writers mean by "conventional" is a little confusing, but has to do with seeing the world as something that is established in nominalistic way. Thus, when we refer to things in the world, say trees, tables, ourselves, and other persons, we should not think of these as existing "from their own side," i.e., as objective things or properties that have existence apart from the way we talk about them. Our entire understanding of the world is embedded within a larger cultural (and hence linguistic) context, and cannot be made sense of apart from this context. The same can be said about those "essentialistic" theories which seek an objective ground: they too are conventional designations, embedded in the way "we" think about the world, and not neutral observations about the way things really are.

These are important insights for the "conventionalist" because we tend to interpret that which is imputed by language and culture for something objective and independent. Thus, I might take my perceptions of the world, my values, and the way I see other people as naturally given, as objective properties or characteristics that have validity independently from the way I have been taught to see them and apart from the way language structures my experience. I thus accept my thoughts and perceptions as "ultimately" true. From the "conventionalist" perspective, this is a serious problem because I then become attached to such "things" and this attachment leads to a series of actions premised on a faulty conception of the world. To reverse this problem one must see the world in a new way, and entails the realization that what *seems* objective and essential is really my own way of

seeing the world from a certain perspective and a certain context that is linguistically and conventionally structured. Such a reversal is no easy task, however, and is only fully accomplished by years of meditation and mental cultivation.

This "conventionalist" reading of Nagarjuna is not without its forerunners. Richard Robinson was one of the first Madhyamika scholars to challenge the "mystical" reading of Nagarjuna, insisting that "emptiness" does not refer to a mind independent or extra-linguistic truth.

> Emptiness is not a term outside the expressional system, but is simply the key term within it. Those who would hypostasize emptiness are confusing the symbol system with the fact system.[26]

According to Robinson, the key term in Nagarjuna's philosophy is *svabhava*, "own being" or "self-existence." Instead of determining the nature of ultimate truth, Robinson argues that Nagarjuna's project is simply to make the point that any theory or view which relies on a conception of *svabhava* is inconsistent. Thus, when Nagarjuna speaks of emptiness he means that things are "empty" of "own being"--that they lack an independent substance or definable characteristic. There is thus no question of determining the ultimate nature of reality, or of seeing the "conventional" as a mere illusion, since all that is meant by the term "emptiness" is lack of *svabhava*.

For Robinson, the basic point Nagarjuna was trying to make was that the idea of something having *svabhava* is inconsistent. Since all things are relational, and since whatever exists can be demonstrated to have causal connections to other things, the idea of entities having "own being" is a logical contradiction. Nagarjuna's point was simply to show that a thing cannot have an intrinsic or essential "self nature" *and* exist in causal

relations at the same time. For Nagarjuna, according to Robinson, the two are mutually exclusive.

> If an entity is real, it has own-being and cannot change; if an entity is unreal, it has no own-being which might change. Own-being is changeless, and dependent co-arising manifests a semblance of change. This fundamental incompatibility is the anvil on which Nagarjuna hammers all his opponents' propositions.[27]

Robinson does not believe Nagarjuna succeeds in hammering "all his opponents' propositions" because he thinks no major tradition in Indian philosophy ever held the type of "own-being" which Nagarjuna ascribes to them. "Own-being" is therefore considered by Robinson a "trick" which Nagarjuna uses for his own purposes, and, though interesting, amounts to nothing but "sophistry."[28]

A number of Madhyamika scholars have challenged Robinson's reading of Nagarjuna as a "sophist," and will not be covered here. What is interesting for our purpose is the transition Robinson makes from viewing "emptiness" as a transcendental term to viewing it as an attempt to establish dependent arising (*pratitya-samutpada*). This is a significant shift, as it marks the beginning of new way of interpreting Nagarjuna. No longer is he characterized as denying the conventional world for the purpose of establishing either a nothingness or an absolute Reality. Rather, Nagarjuna is now seen as the Buddhist philosopher who struggles against the reification of essences, fixed principles, and absolutes, for the purpose of establishing the deep interrelational nexus of existence. "Emptiness" is now both a method and a conventional designation in this new view: it methodologically deconstructs the positing of independent, abstract essences, while simultaneously affirming the ultimacy of our practical, everyday world.

To support this view, the "conventionalist" offers a new reading of the most commonly quoted passage from the *Karikas* (MK 24:18):

Whatever is dependently co-arisen
That is explained to be emptiness.
That, being a dependent designation,
Is itself the middle way.

In this passage, Nagarjuna establishes the identity between dependent arising, emptiness, and conventional truth, and says that this connection is the "middle way." The nihilist interpretation is to say that because emptiness signifies non-existence, which for the Madhyamika is "ultimate" truth, dependent arising is conventional in the sense that it is a *false* appearance; i.e., non-existent. For the mystic, on the other hand, saying that dependent arising is a "dependent designation" (conventional attribute) amounts to saying that it has no basis in reality, no core, since it is but a linguistic convention which "conceals" the highest truth of a transcendental Emptiness.

The "conventionalist" takes a middle position between these two extremes (which, as they say, is the "middle way" Nagarjuna refers to in the above passage: i.e., between nihilism and eternalism). Following Robinson, they say that because emptiness simply refers to the emptiness of "own-being," all that Nagarjuna means in the first two lines of this passage is that it is impossible for dependently arisen phenomena to have identifiable essences. Whatever arises must be without an essence because it is dependent upon conditions, which are themselves dependent upon conditions, and so on. If things had essences, then they would not be able to arise or exist in any causal relations with other things, since essences are by definition independent and conditionless. Therefore, dependent arising is "empty" of "own-being." But in the third line of the passage quoted above, Nagarjuna goes even further. He says that this very emptiness of conditioned phenomena is not itself an essence, since the term "emptiness" is but a "dependent designation", i.e., a verbal or conventional statement. Rather than positing emptiness in an ineffable beyond or using it to deconstruct all notions of existence altogether, both of which

would be to take emptiness as substantial, Nagarjuna simply says that it too is but a conventional designation. Hence, the "emptiness of emptiness."

For the "conventionalist" to say, then, that emptiness, as the "ultimate" truth of existence, is for Nagarjuna nothing but a "dependent designation," he means that the ultimate nature of phenomena is inseparable from a conventional, linguistic, and pragmatic viewpoint. Ultimately, the world is "empty" of essences, that is, "empty" of extra-linguistic or independently identifiable things, which does not mean they have no existence whatsoever (the extreme of nihilism), or that existence is above "this" world (the extreme of eternalism)--but that whatever exists does so through a causal nexus of conventional practices. As Jay Garfield says in his recent book on Nagarjuna,

> Whatever is dependently co-arisen is verbally established. That is, the identity of any dependently arisen thing depends upon verbal conventions. To say of a thing that it is dependently arisen is to say that its identity as a single entity is nothing more than its being the referent of a word. The thing itself, apart from conventions of individuation, has no identity. To say of a thing that its identity is a merely verbal fact about it is to say that it is empty. To view emptiness in this way is to see it neither as an entity nor as unreal--it is to see it as conventionally real.[29]

The "middle path" which Nagarjuna advocates is thus for the "conventionalist" a position between the complete non-existence of the nihilist and the non-conventional realism of the mystic. By taking conventions as the midpoint, Nagarjuna is able to deny an essential reality on the hand, while simultaneously saving phenomena from slipping into complete non-existence on the other. On this view, understanding the ultimate nature of things is simply understanding that all things are ultimately conventional.

The problem which the "conventionalist" sees Madhyamika philosophy as addressing is the attempt to go beyond what is *merely* conventional to something non-conventional. Though the thinkers I am classifying as "conventionalist" have different interpretations on what it means for something to be conventional, they nevertheless all

agree that Nagarjuna is attacking the idea of there being an eternal, objective, mind independent, or extra-linguistic reality. To quote just a few of these thinkers:

> Any attempt to ignore or transcend everyday life in favor of some metaphysical concept of objectivity is inherently meaningless and doomed to failure. . .The truth of the highest meaning takes its reality only through being projected onto the screen of conventional truth. Recognition of the strictly contextual and pragmatic significance of the thoughts and objects that populate our mental and material world renders meaningless any search for a transcendental ground behind these phenomena...What is immediately given in everyday experience is indeed all that there is, for the inherently interdependent nature of the components of this experience *is* the truth of the highest meaning.[30]

> The (Madhyamika) line on the ultimate truth may be put as: the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth. This is the point of their claim that the assertion, 'All existents are devoid of svabhava' is only conventionally true. The idea here is simply that we can rid ourselves of those reificationist tendencies that fuel our own suffering and our indifference toward the welfare of others only by abandoning the very idea that there is some final way--whether expressible or inexpressible--that the world is. The point of the Madhyamika dialectic, of the *reductios* on various metaphysical theories, is not that we should throw away the ladder after we have climbed up it. It is rather that we should stop hankering after a ladder to climb.[31]

> A major difference between Nagarjuna's negative dialectic and the Upanishadic analogic use of words...is that unlike the "*Neti Neti*" ("Not this, not that") expression in *Upanishads*, there is *no inexpressible essential substratum which the negations attempt to describe*...The purpose of the Nagarjuna's negations is not to describe *via negativa* an absolute which cannot be expressed, but to deny the illusion that such a self-existent reality exists...It (emptiness) is the means of quelling the pain found in existential "becoming" which results from longing after an eternal undisturbed entity.[32]

We are now in a position to understand how the conventionalist views the Madhyamika analysis of causality, and how it differs from both the nihilist and the mystic. The nihilist, remember, believes causality to be erroneous for the simple reason that those entities which are necessary for causation to get started are non-existent. The mystic agrees with the nihilist on this point, but asserts that this is only half the picture. Causality is negated along with any self-existent entities because they "conceal" the ultimate truth of

Emptiness. Hence, when Nagarjuna states in the preface to the *Karikas* that existence is "unceasing, unborn...not coming, not going" etc., and says in MK 1:1 that an entity cannot arise from itself, from another, from both, or without a cause, the nihilist and mystic give two different readings. For the nihilist, if everything is non-existent, then it trivially follows that nothing arises, ceases, or comes from anything whatsoever. For the mystic, on the other hand, the ultimate nature of reality is either unchanging and eternal, in which case causal conditions do not apply to it (Murti), or it is beyond the inherent causal constructing feature of linguistic awareness, in which case, again, causality is simply inadmissible (Loy.)

The conventionalist, however, views Nagarjuna as only denying the attempt to reify causation. There is no inherent problem in causal awareness, according to the conventionalist. Rather, the problem lies in our tendency (which some speak of as innate) to reify entities, including ourselves, into static and fixed objects that are substantially "real." This attack on essentialism, however, does not deny the conventional world of causality. In fact, it does just the opposite by establishing the dependent arising of phenomena by showing that independent substances are incompatible with causal relations.

Summary

There are major weakness of each these positions regarding Nagarjuna's thought. In the next chapter we will have a chance to look more thoroughly at what I take to be a fundamental flaw of these positions, and so what is offered here is but a brief critique of their positions.

Beginning with the nihilist interpretation, I will limit my remarks to Wood's analysis, since much has already been written in critique of La Valle Poussin and other early scholars who viewed Buddhism as a pessimistic philosophy. A major of thesis of

Wood's analysis is that both Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike have characterized the Madhyamikas as nihilists. For centuries, he says, Indians have had little doubt that the major aim of Madhyamika is the complete negation of every possible form of existence. Though Wood's thesis is correct for non-Madhyamika Buddhist and other Indian *Darsanas*, it has nothing to do with how the Madhyamikans have spoken of themselves. Instead of proposing nihilism, the Madhyamikans, from Nagarjuna's disciple Aryadeva to Candrakirti, Buddhapalita, Bhavaviveka, as well as the Chinese Madhyamikans Chih-i and Chi-Tsang, and the Tibetan Svatantrika and Prasanghika Madhyamika schools, have consistently denounced a reading of Nagarjuna that would end in nihilism. Thus, even though traditions other than the Madhyamika have found them to be nihilists, that does make them so. Wood's reading of Nagarjuna as a nihilist tends to operate in complete isolation from a vast historical tradition of Madhyamika scholars from India to Japan.

But, let us say for the moment that Wood's analysis of Nagarjuna is correct. What type of experience is supposed to follow from this insight? It seems to me that a thesis of nihilism destroys the entire goal of Buddhist practice, since absolute non-existence entails the futility of meditation, wisdom, compassion, striving for the "fruits" of a Buddhist life, and the absurdity of following the precepts outlined in the Four Noble Truths. Any talk of a religious or soteriological experience would then be contradictory and absurd. Is Nagarjuna denouncing such basic Buddhist views and practices? I think there is ample evidence to suppose that he was not.

For example, in Chapter twenty-four of the *Karikas*, Nagarjuna deals with the Four Noble Truths. The Chapter begins with an opponent who says that if everything is "empty" then such things as the Four Noble Truths, knowledge, meditation, manifestation, the spiritual community, the "three jewels" etc. will be impossible to attain. This seems the likely response from one who has taken "emptiness" to mean non-existence (as Wood has).

However, Nagarjuna response is to correct this mistaken view of "emptiness." He beings by saying in MK 24:7:

> We say that this understanding of yours
> Of emptiness and the purpose of emptiness
> And of the significance of emptiness is incorrect.
> As a consequence you are harmed by it.

Nagarjuna then proceeds to turn the tables on the opponent who has taken emptiness to mean non-existence. He says that it is not "emptiness" that destroys the Four Noble Truths, etc. but its opposite: *svabhava*. If one perceives things in terms of essences, Nagarjuna says, then it is impossible for existence to arise, for there to be causes and conditions, arising and ceasing, suffering, and extinction of suffering. This is a crucial point, as it shows what the doctrine of "emptiness" is aiming at. Rather than negating existence, Nagarjuna says that it only negates an essentialistic conception of existence, since if one holds on to an idea of essences, i.e., independent substances, then it is impossible to account for change, suffering, and the paths toward salvation. In MK 24:23-25, he says the following:

> If suffering had an essence,
> Its cessation would not exist.
> So if an essence is posited,
> One denies cessation
>
> If the path had an essence
> Cultivation would not be appropriate.
> If this path is indeed cultivated,
> It cannot have an essence.
>
> If suffering, arising, and
> Ceasing are nonexistent
> By what path could one seek
> To obtain the cessation of suffering?

It is clear from these passages that Nagarjuna accepts the goals and practices of the Buddhist life. Thinking in terms of essences, he implies, leads to a form of nihilism in which all efforts are deemed worthless, since essences preclude the types of changes one needs to go through in order to overcome attachments. Hence, rather than proposing the absolute non-existence of all things, Nagarjuna seems to be saying just the opposite by noting that the religious life depends on a world of inter-related conditions, and such conditions are necessarily without essences.

The "mystical" interpretation is a step above the nihilist, because it brings out the deeply religious character of Nagarjuna's thought. The idea of transcendence is obviously a powerful ideal in all religious traditions, and plays a strong role in Buddhism as well. The manner in which the mystical interpreters of Nagarjuna characterize transcendence, however, is not only dualistic, but, given their own claims about the lack of theoretical and conceptual distinctions that accompany transcendence, they are inconsistent.

Leaving aside the fact the "mystics" filter Nagarjuna through a conspicuous Kantian/Vedantic screen in which “this” world is juxtaposed with a “higher” world, their main thesis turns on a vision of transcendence in which the "dualities" of conceptual and linguistic thought are erased. They claim that our everyday world is imbedded in a type of linguistic "metaphysics" that gives rise to cause and effect, independent entities, static things, etc. Hence, truth is an experience in which such "concealing" and bifurcating activities are no longer present. The difficulty with this view is that it relies on the very dualism which it tries to escape. That is, by describing everyday "conventions" as concealing "true" experience, the mystics are committed to a number of dichotomies that betray their own underlying assumptions about the nature of reality. Rather than escaping a dualistic world-view, they simply multiply a number of highly dubious dichotomies:

linguistic versus the non-linguistic, the conceptual versus the non-conceptual, causal versus non-causal awareness, and conventional versus ultimate, and so on.

What leads them to such dualisms, however, is their own essentialistic view of language which, if they were consistent, would have to be deconstructed as well, since it harbors deep assumptions. Does language have an essential structure such that it is impossible to speak without "chopping" the world into discreet particles? Are we committed every time we speak or think to some causal view of the world, or to a vision of reality that posits abstract, independent entities? It is not at all obvious to me that we do this in our everyday experiences, and neither is it obvious that if we do happen to reify certain things in the world it is due to linguistic use. The mystic would respond by saying that I just don't see how implicated we are in dualistic thinking, or that I'm resisting the letting go of my attachments that arise from linguistic use. But in saying this it would be the mystic who is committed to a form of essentialism. I have no set view of language or the world--which is not to say that I don't suffer from attachments--but that these attachments may not be caused by some inherent structure in language. In fact, it is not clear to me that there is any essential structure to language at all, and hence it seems to be the mystic who is committed to a certain theoretical view regarding language.

Rather than overcoming all "metaphysical" views and theories, therefore, the mystic seems to be erecting more "views" about the nature of reality. In this sense, Nagarjuna falls quite short of being the Buddhist Derridean, as some "mystics" like to think of him. In fact, on this view he looks more like a Kant than a Derrida, and more akin to Plato than the latter Wittgenstein, for, instead of deconstructing "metaphysics," Nagarjuna seems on this view to be replacing one essentialistic view with another, one more theory about how the world "really" works, how language structures the world, and about how "we" humans need to overcome the inherent dualities inscribed in language and conceptualization. This

"mystical" interpretation fails to address these problems, and therefore suffers from some major weaknesses.

The "conventionalist" interpretation seems in many respects to be the best reading of Nagarjuna. It attempts to traverse a position between the extremes of nihilism and absolutism by viewing Nagarjuna's thought as primarily a critique of essentialism. Both the nihilistic and the mystical accounts of Nagarjuna tend toward extremes philosophical positions: they see him as either describing the absolute non-existence of reality or, by some *via negativa* route, an ineffable realm. The conventionalist, on the other hand, tries to remain more faithful to the Buddhist "Middle Path" by having Nagarjuna reject both alternatives.

On the one hand, the reduction to conventional discourse has the benefit of de-mystifying certain problems in life. Instead of looking toward an ineffable realm for solutions, or searching for hidden origins to certain life problems, the conventionalist sees everyday explanations as fit for the task of solving whatever problems we have. In this sense, it views Buddhism as grounded in the everyday practices of concrete individuals.

The weakness of the conventionalist view, however, is that it tends to be just as reductive as the other two views of Nagarjuna. It assumes that any talk whatsoever of metaphysics, transcendence, "hidden powers," or non-empirical experience is absurd, and that the only thing we (or Nagarjuna) can speak coherently of are the "conventional" practices of human culture. Ultimate truth, according to the conventionalist reading, is the view that there is no ultimate truth, or that it is meaningless to talk of anything beyond conventional discourse. Any attempt to go beyond this, they say, stems from ignorance. The major problem with this view is that it explains away those passages which describe "truth" as something that transcends "conventional" discourse. There are numerous

examples like the following from the *Prajnaparamitra* sutras which counter a strict "conventionalist" reading of the Mahayana.

> This perfection of wisdom in fact lies outside all conventional discourse, it is unutterable, unpronounceable, it cannot be talked about. For it is not possible to utter this perfection of wisdom, to express it in conventional words, or to talk about it; an answer of this kind, that is the perfection of wisdom. For the perfection of wisdom is not past, future, or present; for it cannot be pointed out be a past mark, a future mark, or a present mark; markless and inexpressible is this perfection of wisdom.[33]
> The cutting off of all limits is called the "Nirvana-limit"; but again not so as one speaks of it. For inexpressible is Nirvana, and all conventional expressions are there completely cut off...for the Nirvana-element is something that cannot be expounded, it has completely transcended all expositions.[34]

Nagarjuna sees his thought as no more than a continuation of the Mahayana view, and he makes numerous references that seem to describe a non-conventional "truth." In Chapter 18 of the *Karikas*, for example, Nagarjuna says the following:

> 9. Not dependent on another, peaceful, and
> Not fabricated by mental fabrication,
> Not thought, without distinctions,
> That is the character of reality (that-ness).

The weakness of the "conventionalist" reading stems from not seeing Nagarjuna as deeply embedded within the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism. Most of these thinkers of course acknowledge the fact that Nagarjuna was a Mahayanist, but do so inadvertently, perhaps with a sentence or two in the preface of their works, and therefore tend to gloss over just how immersed he really was in the style of teaching, the concepts, and the world-view of the Mahayana tradition. It seems apparent, in fact, that many of these scholars implicitly accept A.K. Warder's view that Nagarjuna was not even a Mahayana Buddhist. As Warder says,

> Modern students have sometimes supposed that he (Nagarjuna) is criticizing early Buddhism, or the early schools, in order to set up Mahayana instead. Is there any truth in this supposition? We have already pointed out that there is nothing overtly Mahayanist...[35]

As Hsueh-li Cheng notes, however, this view is unacceptable. It is obvious that Nagarjuna was indeed a devoted Mahayana since he was not only emblemized as the patriarch of various Mahayana sects, but says directly in his *Twelve Gate Treatise* that his entire philosophical project is to clarify and delineate the views of Mahayana Buddhism. As Nagarjuna says,

> I want to reveal and make clear the supremely great teachings of the Tathagata, Therefore, I will briefly explain the teachings of Mahayana.[36]

By neglecting Nagarjuna's indebtedness to this larger Mahayana tradition we can easily fall prey to either misunderstanding his entire project, or speaking of his views in a highly limited context. The "conventionalist" interpretation suffers from such restrictions. It tends to treat Nagarjuna as an isolated figure, critiquing any and all theories from a "no-position" and philosophizing from a historical no-man's land. It is thus never able to explain in a satisfactory way what Nagarjuna means by emptiness, and why he uses the doctrine of "two truths."

As we have seen from the preceding chapters on the Mahayana tradition, however, the guiding principle behind all philosophical terms and expositions is the idea of *upaya*. The *Vimalakirti*, it should be recalled, utilizes the "two truths" within a Mahayana context, and does so as a narrative device. The reason for saying that some teachings are conventional while others are ultimate is *upayic*, which undermines both epistemological and ontological readings of the distinction. Nagarjuna is deeply embedded in this Mahayana

tradition which emphasizes the contextual and heuristic value of all teachings. Hence, when he refers to "emptiness", causality, the "two truths", and the relationship between nirvana and samsara, he is simply trying to clarify their meanings from within a tradition that he wholeheartedly accepts.

The general thrust of the Mahayana is an emphasis on a plurality of teachings, world-views, doctrines, and practices, which can aid sentient beings in non-attachment. Emptiness, dependent arising, the "two truths" etc. are only a few of these teachings, and their status as "skilful means" underlines the fact that they are non-reductive; i.e., they are not the whole truth, or the only story in town. Other stories, teachings, practices, and doctrines can work just as beneficially depending on the person, culture, or context. By denying the validity of these other, perhaps "metaphysical" teachings, the conventionalist pries Nagarjuna from his own context within the Mahayana tradition and ascribes to him somewhat restrictive views on the nature of reality.

The following chapter will bring out this weakness in more detail.

NOTES

[1] For good discussions of the history of Madhymamika thought, see, David S. Ruegg, *The Literature of the Madhyamika School of Philosophy in India* (Wiesbaden; Otto Harrassowitz, 1981), and Richard Robinson's *Early Madhyamika in India and China*, (Madison, Wisconsin Press, 1967).

[2] It should be obvious that this tripartite division into three interpretations is not fixed. There are subtle and sometimes great differences within the groups I have labeled as the "mystic," the "nihilist," and the "conventionalist." My reason for this division is only to give a sense of the major differences in the way that Nagarjuna is interpreted.

[3] From, Andrew Tuck, *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship*, (Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 33.

[4] Ibid., p. 36.

[5] Thomas Wood, *Nagarjunian Disputations: A Philosophical Journey through an Indian Looking-Glass* (University of Hawaii Press, 1994), p. 279-280.

[6] Ibid., p. 13.

[7] Ibid., p. 266.

[8] Ibid., p. 53.

[9] Ibid., p. 226.

[10] Candrakirti, *Prasannapada*, Mervyn Sprung, trans., *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way* (Boulder: Prajna Press, 1979), p. 35.

[11] Fyodor Stcherbatsky, *Buddhist Logic*, Vol. 1 (Leningrad: Academy of Sciences of the USSR, 1923), see, especially, pp. 7-15.

[12] Fyodor Stcherbatsky, *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvana* (Delhi: Motilal, 1968), p. 60.

[13] T.R.V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1955), p. 126.

[14] Ibid., p. 209.

[15] David Loy, "The Paradox of Causality in Madhyamika,"*International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 25. (1985): p. 63-72.

[16] Harold Coward, *Derrida and Indian Philosophy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990) p., 115.

[17] Murti (1955), p. 138.

[18] Ibid., p. 138-139.

[19] Murti (1955), p. 133.

[20] Candrakirti, *Prasannapada*, Mervyn Sprung, trans., *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way* (Boulder: Prajna Press, 1979), p. 42.

[21] Ibid., p. 43.

[22] Loy, "The Paradox of Causality" p. 66.

[23] Ibid., p. 68

[24] David Loy, "The Cloture of Deconstruction: A Mahayana Critique of Derrida," *International Philosophical Quarterly,* Vol. 27 (1987): p. 59-80.

[25] Kalupahana (1986), who sees Nagarjuna as a type of empiricist, says that dependent origination is that which is given to immediate experience, and that if we were to confine ourselves to that which is given, and not search for something mysterious, then we would fully understand that "conventional" truth is simply an immediate awareness of conditioned phenomena. Garfield (1995) and Huntington (1989) seem to share this view, but emphasize a point about not searching for "necessary connections" or "secret powers" in the causal nexus, since conventional explanations are all that is needed to sufficiently understand causation. And Matilal (1986) has one view of Nagarjuna as a skeptic, in which Nagarjuna is simply critical of the possibility of justifying our knowledge claims regarding causation. All seem to agree, however, that Nagarjuna was not denying conventional reality.

[26] Richard Robinson, *Early Madhyamika in India and China* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), p. 49.

[27] Ibid., p. 41.

[28] Richard Robinson, "Did Nagarjuna Really Refute all Metaphysical Views?" *Philosophy East and West,* Vol.22 (1972): p. 325-331.

[29] Jay L. Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 305.

[30] C.W. Huntington, Jr., *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Madhyamika*, (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1989), p. 39-40.

[31] Mark Siderits, "Thinking on Empty: Madhyamaka Anti-Realism and Canons of Rationality," in *Rationality in Question*, Shlomo Biderman, ed., (E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1989), p. 231-250.

[32] Frederick Streng, *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), p. 146-149.

[33] *Perfect Wisdom: The Short Prajnaparamitra Texts*, Edward Conze, trans., (Buddhist Publishing Group, 1973.), p. 43.

[34] Ibid., p. 10.

[35] A. K. Warder, "Is Nagarjuna a Mahayanist?", in *The Problem of Two Truths in Buddhism and Vedanta*, ed. by Mervyn Sprung (D. Reidel, Boston, 1973), p. 13.

[36] Nagarjuna, *Twelve Gate Treatise*, Hsueh-li Cheng, trans., (D. Reidel Boston, 1982), p. 53-54.

CHAPTER VI

THE POISONOUS MEDICINE: NAGARJUNA'S "PHILOSOPHY"

Introduction

What are we to make of the contradictory readings that we find in traditional Madhyamika scholarship? It would be too easy to say that they arise from subtle hermeneutic variations, as if each group of Madhyamika scholars were simply bringing to light a new perspective. It would also be too easy to say that these different readings speak of alternative "standpoints" that Nagarjuna adopted in his writings; i.e., that he sometimes spoke *as* a nihilist, a mystic, a skeptic, and a conventionalist, because as a Buddhist he was trying to address different types of people from various backgrounds. This way of resolving the discrepancies would lend support to the idea of "skilful means" that I have advocated throughout this thesis; Nagarjuna could then be seen as the ultimate soteriological pluralist, teaching contradictory views for the purpose of speaking to different psychological and karmic dispositions.

This form of *upayic* relativism is difficult to make sense of, however, because the disagreements in scholarship center around specific passages from Nagarjuna's writings. When Nagarjuna says, for example, that all things are "empty" of inherent nature, we get incommensurable positions. From the nihilist we get the view that the world is absolutely nothing; from the mystic we get the idea of an ineffable truth; and from the conventionalist we get the idea that all things are nominally real. Such divergent interpretations cannot be resolved through a "relativity of standpoints" because they contradict each other on the

same texts. Although we could say that they all offer different insights into the philosophy of Nagarjuna, they cannot all be right.

There is a common weakness in these "contradictory" readings, however. Each of them acknowledges the fact that Nagarjuna is an Indian and a Buddhist, and that his views are therefore contextual and historically specific. While acknowledging this, however, they tend to ignore Nagarjuna's context and speak of him as a "philosopher" whose problems are best understood in relation to much larger "philosophical" concerns. The issues Nagarjuna struggles with are often explained not simply as Indian and Buddhist, but about the "nature" of language, consciousness, causality, realism, objectivity, and propositional truth claims. What the "contradictory" readings share is a view that sees Nagarjuna's assertions as sweeping across all intellectual, cultural, and historical boundaries, depicting his voice as having the same tone and the same resonance as other philosophers, and struggling with them in a common pursuit. He is thus portrayed as a Kantian saying something about the limitations of rational thought, or a Wittgensteinian saying something about language, or a Humean dealing with causation, or an anti-realist, skeptic, or Derridean deconstructonist.

What is interesting in this way of looking at Nagarjuna is that he looks less like an Indian Mahayana Buddhist and more like a "philosopher." In other words, the problems he struggles with are not much different from the problems other thinkers deal with in philosophies of mind, language, metaphysics, or epistemology, and what Nagarjuna has to say is important because, as most scholars like to think of him, he is offering a new way of approaching the types of problems that occupy Western philosophers.

It is this approach to Nagarjuna that I wish to address in this section. The problem I want to focus on centers around the view that Nagarjuna is responding to certain "philosophical" problems, and that his methodology can be explained as a critique of more

general theoretical issues that we find in the history of metaphysics, philosophy of language, logic, or epistemology.

For most scholars, Nagarjuna's insight into the problems of philosophy comes from his dialectical use of the term, "emptiness." They see this as the key insight because "emptiness" supposedly signifies a radical critique of certain philosophical problems surrounding realism, causality, language, space, time, and motion. "Emptiness" attacks these problems by uprooting the conceptual presuppositions on which they stand. What is significant in this approach to Nagarjuna is that although there is sharp disagreement about what his methodology of "emptiness" says about the world after the deconstruction of certain philosophical categories (i.e., is the world an ungrounded nothingness, a mystical "oneness," or a nominal designation?), they all seem to agree that his method says something to philosophers by addressing the same types of issues that they have been concerned with since at least Plato.

Why this approach is misleading is the subject of following two chapters. What seems wrong in these views is that in order to say that Nagarjuna is addressing general philosophical problems we find ourselves completely neglecting the rhetorical context in which his ideas developed; i.e., we stop speaking about Nagarjuna, or about the people his ideas are supposed to address, and begin speaking about very general, abstract problems shared by radically different thinkers from distinct cultural contexts. The problem Nagarjuna has with language then becomes the same problem that thinkers like Derrida or Wittgenstein have with language, or Nagarjuna's critique of causation becomes Hume's critique of causation. When we frame Nagarjuna's problem in this light, however, and see it as something mainly theoretical or philosophical, we not only lose the rhetorical dimension in which his ideas are situated--but, as we will see, we miss one of his most basic teachings.

What makes this project especially complicated is that the interpretive literature surrounding Nagarjuna depicts his opponents in a non-soteriological, purely "philosophical" light as well. That is, if we see Nagarjuna's opponents as offering abstract theories on the nature of reality, then it makes sense to think of Nagarjuna as arguing against their views in the abstract as well. If the Abhidharma only offers a theory of "radical pluralism," for example, and the Nyaya simply describes the necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge, then it might make sense to speak of these traditions, as some scholars do, in purely philosophical terms. If this were the case then we would be able to fully understand Nagarjuna within this context as well, i.e., we could see him as dealing with problems in ontology, metaphysics, or epistemology.

The problem with this is that the Abhidharma and Nyaya are doing much more than simply describing the nature of the world or the "means of cognition." Their theories, and this includes every tradition that Nagarjuna argues against, are not just "theories" in general, and nor are they neutral observations about the nature of reality or consciousness. Rather, all these traditions are engaged in what can be called, "theories of liberation." This includes the Mahayana, Nyaya, Abhidharma, Vedanta, and even to some extent the Carvaka traditions, in which soteriology is not a secondary issue that comes after more general philosophical concerns, but is the driving force that motivates all "theoretical" discussions. Just as their problems can only be fully appreciated within the context of liberation, so any discussion of Nagarjuna that puts soteriology in a subordinate position will mislead us as to his real aims.

Although scholars readily acknowledge the fact that the purpose of Nagarjuna's dialectic is to facilitate liberation, they de-emphasize the soteriological in relation to the philosophical; that is, they see Nagarjuna as primarily concerned with philosophical problems, and see Nagarjuna as saying that these problems need to be solved in order to

achieve liberation. Thus, in their views, soteriology is contingent upon a "correct" philosophical analysis of the world. While these views of Nagarjuna do acknowledge the importance of liberation, they undercut its status by placing it beneath "greater" philosophical problems about realism, metaphysics, epistemology, and essentialism. Framed in this way, Nagarjuna's primary aim is to attack these problems--with soteriology tacked on as an "added" bonus.

Part of the purpose of this chapter is to show how this way of looking at Nagarjuna is misleading. Soteriology is not secondary to the "philosophical" in Nagarjuna's thought, and nor does it follow upon the heels of a more general critique of "realism," "metaphysics," or "epistemology." Rather, soteriological considerations are at the heart of Nagarjuna's thought, and, therefore, his dialectic of "emptiness" deals with theories of realism only as they pertain to liberation, theories of causality only as they to lead to liberation, and theories of epistemology only as they are considered necessary for a soteriological experience. As we will come to Nagarjuna, it is not that soteriology is contingent upon philosophical analysis, but that his problems, whether ontological, epistemological, or metaphysical, are really problems about the proper way to attain liberation.

This does not mean, as some scholars say, that the major Indian traditions are simply "religious" rather than "philosophical." The fact that every major Indian tradition venerates logical analysis makes this a false dichotomy. Thus, it is not that Nagarjuna or Buddhism despises "philosophy" because philosophy deals in mere conceptual issues while "religion" speaks of more spiritual matters. My point is only that it is a mistake to frame Nagarjuna's thought so that we see him addressing problems that have nothing to do with soteriology.

If we can see Nagarjuna as operating specifically in the context of Indian and Buddhist soteriological concerns, then we might get a different, less "contradictory," view of his thought. Instead of seeing him as speaking to general philosophical issues, we will be more apt to see him as addressing theories of liberation, and, therefore, less willing to categorize him as a mystic, an anti-realist, a nihilist, a conventionalist, or a skeptic.

To make these points clear, there are two main questions we need to address. First, what is Nagarjuna's methodology? Many scholars see his use of dialectical logic as the most important feature of his philosophy. With it, Nagarjuna attacks the mainstream of Indian thought, critiques the idea of "inherent nature," distinguishes between two types of "truths," and comes to the conclusion that all things are "empty." For comparative philosophers, Nagarjuna's methodology is the most significant aspect of his thought because with it we see him responding to general philosophical concerns. Thus, we need to get clear on what Nagarjuna's methodology is, and how he uses it.

The second question we need to ask has to do with the audience Nagarjuna is addressing. Who is Nagarjuna speaking to when he says that all things are "empty of inherent nature"? What is the problem he confronts with this claim, and to whom is it a response? Does it have, as many scholars assume, "universal" appeal, i.e., does it speak to wider audience that lacks the types of concerns that go along with soteriology?

I will try to answer these questions in the next two chapters. Beginning with Nagarjuna's methodology, we will see that it is not something that has meaning outside the context of "skilful means." That is, Nagarjuna's use of "emptiness," and his employment of dialectical logic, are part of a general Mahayana view about how Buddhist teachings are supposed to function. What we will come to understand is that Nagarjuna's method is part of a tradition that values the practice of "skilful means," and that this method emphasizes the need to be attentive to the desires, dispositions, and psychological traits of those whom

the teachings are supposed to help. In other words, the method has less to do with general philosophical problems and more with pedagogical strategies for helping others. With this mind, we will see whom Nagarjuna is responding to when he speaks of "emptiness," and what type of problem, specifically, he wants to address.

To understand this section it is necessary to keep in mind the teachings of Vimalakirti. One of the most interesting characteristics of Vimalakirti was the way he practiced the Buddhist ideal of "skilful means." By condemning the disciples and bodhisattvas who preached the Dharma without being in touch with the needs and dispositions of their audience, Vimalakirti showed us how *not* to think of Buddhism. The problem Vimalakirti had with the disciples was that they taught Buddhist doctrine in a formalized way: they spoke without any knowledge their audience. Vimalakirti chastises them for this, and says that the primary way to help others is to be attentive to one's audience. By emphasizing "skilful means," Vimalakirti directs Buddhism back to its pedagogical and heuristic context, and warns us about the dangers in promoting Buddhist doctrine independent of those it is supposed to address.

If we keep Vimalakirti's teachings in mind then we will see how much of the debate surrounding Nagarjuna mirrors those whom Vimalakirti chastised. The debates over Nagarjuna's ideas have to do with the formal structure of his dialectic and about whether "emptiness" successfully deconstructs all metaphysical views. Framed in this way, we not only lose sight of the pedagogical, heuristic, and soteriological context in which Nagarjuna's problems make sense, but we lose Vimalakirti's basic point about "skilful means."

Nagarjuna the Philosopher

When scholars refer to Nagarjuna's "method" it is easy to get the impression that it is a purely logical formulation used to deconstruct all fallacious views. They often see "emptiness" as a critique of "essentialism," of "metaphysics," of "realism," and of the project of trying to philosophically justify any particular world-view. Nagarjuna analyzes certain essentialistic, metaphysical, or realistic theories about the world, according to many scholars, and then deconstructs them; that is, he applies the logic of "emptiness" to the idea of essence, for example, and shows that it is logically absurd, or he takes up the Nyaya view that language refers to particular objects in the world and shows how it is contradictory. Scholars see his use of the "four-fold negation" (*tetralemma*) by which he refutes these positions as the most insightful aspect of his philosophy.

The logic of "emptiness" by which Nagarjuna critiques the idea of "inherent nature" is what many scholars find interesting because it appears to address the same types of concerns that other philosophers address. Hence, Nagarjuna's refutation of causality resembles Hume's refutation of causality, or Nagarjuna's critique of a referential view of language seems to be what Wittgenstein was saying as well, or, even more extensive, are what some scholars see to be Nagarjuna's alliance with Sextus Empiricus or other skeptics who reject the possibility of coming up with any metaphysical or "realistic" account of reality.

Generally, scholars are interested in the *form* of Nagarjuna's logic. The most basic characterization of this form is a series of negative responses to four possible alternatives. Called the *catuskoti*, it can be standardized in the following way:

1. It is not the case that x is ø.
2. It is not the case that x is not-ø.

3. It is not the case that x is both ø and not-ø.
4. It is not the case that x is neither ø nor not-ø.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Nagarjuna uses this four-fold logic against a whole series of arguments ranging from causality, the self, the aggregates, production, destruction, permanence, impermanence, space, time, motion, and so forth. Against a particular view of causation, for example, Nagarjuna applies the *catuskoti* and concludes that *dharmas* (x) are not produced (ø), not non-produced, neither both, nor neither. Or, against a certain view of motion, he applies the dialectic and concludes that motion (x) is not moving (ø), not non-moving, neither both, nor neither.

Nagarjuna's logic appeals to scholars because they see it as an attack against every possible philosophical construction of reality. An examination of space, time, the self, impermanence, eternity, substance, essence, consciousness, the "means of cognition" and so forth can all be subjected to Nagarjuna's dialectic with the result, as most scholars see, that no positive account can be given about the nature of reality, causality, space, time, motion, the mind, and so on.

Because scholars see Nagarjuna's method as having to do only with the form of arguments, they see him as saying something very general about philosophical theories and views. Ever since T. R. V. Murti wrote his landmark on Madhyamika thought, scholars have struggled with whether Nagarjuna has successfully deconstructed all possible "theories." In this context, a theory is any view, proposition, or philosophical description of reality, of the mind, of how we know the world, or what makes up a valid cognition. According to Murti, Nagarjuna did in fact succeed, since he showed that any conceptual scheme has the seed of its own contradiction, and therefore cannot be established with certainty. The dialectic is the rejection of all "theory," says Murti, since it takes up the four

alternative positions to which all "views" can be adequately subsumed and shows them to lead to absurdity. This is how Murti sees the function of Nagarjuna's dialectic:

> The four sets of views serve as schema for classifying all systems of philosophy. The consideration of the real as Being, uniform, universal and identical everywhere is the affirmative view. This is in the main represented by the systems of the atma-tradition, especially by the Vedanta which takes sat (atman) alone as real. The Buddhist or Humean view is a good example of the negative attitude; it is a denial of substance, of the universal and the identical, and the acceptance of the asat. The synthetic view like that of Jaina or Hegel is an example of the third alternative. The Agnostic or the Septic like Pyrrho or Sanjaya can be cited as examples of the fourth.
> How does the Madhyamika reject any and all views? He uses only one weapon. By drawing out the implications of any view he shows its self-contradictory character. The dialectic is a series of *reductio ad absurdum* arguments. Every thesis is turned against itself. The Madhyamika is a prasanghika . . . a dialectician or free-lance debater . . . (he) disproves the opponent's thesis, and does *not* prove any thesis of his own.[1]

Although many scholars disagree with the conclusion that Murti draws from all of this (i.e., that the dialectic leads to a non-rational, mystical intuition of ultimate reality), they nevertheless tend to accept the spirit of what Murti's says. That is, they accept his claim that the function of the dialectic points to something about "theory" in general. And so, though scholars may disagree with Murti's "mystical" conclusion, they do agree that Nagarjuna is trying to deconstruct a certain way of doing philosophy, and therefore shares the same vocabulary as other philosophers; that is, he is saying something about the way Hume does philosophy, or the way Derrida "deconstructs" language, or the way Wittgenstein dissolves philosophical problems. In his attack on "theory," Nagarjuna is saying something similar to these other philosophers, and it is expressed through the formal structure of his dialectic.

Apparently, most scholars accept Murti's view that Nagarjuna is trying to demolish all "views" because the debates about the validity of Nagarjuna's project take place on this level. The questions commonly asked have to do with whether Nagarjuna really

accomplishes this, that is, whether he has in fact revealed the contradictory assumptions in any view regarding causality, the self, space, time, and motion. Nagarjuna's claim in the *Vigrahavyavartani*[2] where he asserts that he has no thesis, position, or philosophical view of his own is analyzed with the following types of questions in mind: "Is it possible to deconstruct all 'views,' to reduce to absurdity all constructive philosophical positions, and *not* put another 'view' in its place? Isn't the deconstruction of 'views' itself a 'view'? And how can Nagarjuna attack the conceptual presuppositions of all philosophical projects without relying on the very same conceptual structures that he seeks to criticize?" Such questions are common in Nagarjuna scholarship, and show that what is at stake in these debates is the formal validity of Nagarjuna's argument; that is, that the way we are supposed to think of his methodological critique of "inherent nature" is in terms of how devastating it really is to all theoretical projects.

One of the clearest examples of this trend comes from Richard Robinson's treatment of Nagarjuna's dialectic in his early article, "Did Nagarjuna Really Refute all Metaphysical Views?"[3] Posing the question in this way allows Robinson to evaluate Nagarjuna's dialectic on purely logical grounds, and in doing so frames the discussion in terms of whether Nagarjuna actually offers sound arguments. As he says:

> Nagarjuna has a standard mechanism for refutation, the pattern of which may be abstracted as follows: You say that c relates a and b. A and b must be either completely identical or completely different. If they are completely identical, c cannot obtain, because it is transitive and requires two terms. If they are completely different c cannot obtain, because two things that are completely different can have no common ground and so cannot be related. Therefore it is false that c obtains between a and b.[4]

As Robinson goes on to say, Nagarjuna constructed this "standard mechanism" with the intent of applying it to any metaphysical thesis, and, if it works, then Nagarjuna should be credited with demolishing all constructive philosophical positions. As Robinson

goes on to say, however, Nagarjuna "tricks" us into believing that philosophers actually hold the types of views that can be subjected to this dialectical formula. However, neither the Indian systems nor Modern Western philosophers advance the type of substance view that Nagarjuna wants to criticize, and, therefore, as Robinson says, Nagarjuna is a "sophist," similar to the well-known tricksters at country fairs.

What is interesting in Robinson's analysis is not just that he is responding to Murti's claim that Nagarjuna has successfully demolished all metaphysical views, but that he adopts Murti's view of what Nagarjuna intends. That is, he accepts the claim put forth by Murti that the dialectic is responding to general theoretical concerns. For Murti, Nagarjuna's logical negations are on par with Kant's antinomies in that they supposedly reveal the inherent limitations of conceptual thought. In accepting this basic premise, not only is Nagarjuna's method abstracted from its context within the Indian tradition, but it is then open to the purely formal reduction that Robinson performs.

What is even more telling is that the general current of Nagarjuna scholarship adopts this way of looking at Nagarjuna's methodological critique. Whether Nagarjuna is categorized as a mystic, a skeptic, a conventionalist, an anti-realist, or a nihilist, the common thread that unites all these modern interpretations is the assumption that Nagarjuna's dialectic is not just applicable to general philosophical concerns, but that it is best understood in relation to these concerns, i.e., that we should understand Nagarjuna as struggling with problems surrounding realism, metaphysics, or essentialism.

To see the truth in this, let's look at just a few examples from the most recent studies on Nagarjuna. Though all of the thinkers I will now discuss have profound differences in how they view Nagarjuna, it is important to see that what they do share is the view that Nagarjuna is primarily concerned with "philosophical" issues.

There is a strong movement in Madhyamika scholarship to answer Robinson's charge of sophistry without, on the one hand, falling into the type of nihilistic reading offered by thinkers like Wood, and, on the other hand, staying clear of the mystical reading offered by Murti, Loy, Nagao, and others. Many scholars are keen to show for example that Nagarjuna is non-metaphysical, that he has no positive philosophical position, and that he can deconstruct without putting in its place another philosophical theory. Like Murti and Robinson, however, they see the doctrine of "emptiness" to be the methodological core of Nagarjuna's thought, explaining its value in terms of general philosophical categories.

Jay Garfield, for example, understands Nagarjuna's dialectic as a "skeptical" stance against essentialism. That is, what Nagarjuna does is to show that any account of reality that relies on essence, substance, or "inherent nature" is contradictory. In this sense, Nagarjuna shares with other skeptics the common goal of curing "us" of our philosophical illness. As he says,

> The ills that skepticism aims to cure are philosophical ills--specifically metaphysical and epistemological ills characterized by the obsessive search for epistemologically or ontologically primitive foundations for knowledge, meaning, explanation, or morality that undergird our collective epistemic, linguistic, scientific, and moral practices. The *positions* the skeptic is concerned to undermine are specifically philosophical positions.[5]

When Garfield applies Nagarjuna's dialectic to causality, he finds that it is akin to Hume's critique, since both show that there is no basis for assuming "deep" causal connections between phenomena or "hidden powers" that inhere within the causal nexus. And when he applies it to the idea of "truth," the dialectic resembles the skeptics, since, like them, Nagarjuna shows that no positive account of an ultimate or objective truth is coherent.

> The central topic of the text (*Mulamadhyamakakarika*) is emptiness--the Buddhist technical term for the lack of independent existence, or essence in things. Nagarjuna relentlessly analyzes phenomena or processes that appear to exist independently and argues that they cannot so exist . . . If the analysis in terms of emptiness is the substantive heart . . . the method of reductio ad absurdum is the methodological core. Nagarjuna, like Western skeptics, systematically eschews the defenses of positive metaphysical doctrines regarding the nature of things, arguing rather that any such positive thesis is incoherent and that, in the end, our conventions and our conceptual framework can never be justified by demonstrating their correspondence to an independent reality. Rather, he suggests, what counts as real depends precisely on our conventions.[6]

We already had a chance to examine Garfield's "conventionalist" reading of Nagarjuna in the last chapter. We saw, for example, that what "emptiness" means for Garfield has to do both with a critique of essentialism and with a view that says that because all things are "empty" of essence they are therefore conventionally real. It is not my purpose here to review his argument again. Rather, what we should focus on is the way he describes Nagarjuna's method: "Emptiness" is a "technical term," an analysis that "systematically eschews the defenses of positive metaphysical doctrines regarding the nature of things."

In putting it this way, we can see just how similar Garfield is to Robinson and Murti, both of whom saw Nagarjuna's method as a formalistic critique of all philosophy. The point of the dialectic is defined by all these thinkers as an attack on constructive philosophy in general: it deconstructs and abolishes those projects that rely on an essentialistic explanation of the world. The difference between them lies in what they think Nagarjuna deconstructs: for Robinson, even though Nagarjuna turns out to be a "sophist," he nevertheless tries to undercut all metaphysical theories; for Murti, Nagarjuna successfully undermines the limited nature of rational and conceptual thought; and for Garfield, Nagarjuna deconstructs the idea of positing essences, hidden powers, or substances. Though all three differ in what they see Nagarjuna doing, they all share the assumption that he's addressing larger theoretical concerns.

We can see a similar approach to Nagarjuna in Huntington's analysis of the Madhyamika tradition in his book, *The Emptiness of Emptiness.* For Huntington, "emptiness" is "philosophical propaganda"--that is, it serves to deconstruct "our" obsession with rationalistic structures, epistemological justification, and ontological categories. The Madhyamika dialectic cuts to the core of most Western philosophy, says Huntington, showing that our search for a-priori principles on which to ground our beliefs is ultimately meaningless. As he says,

> The Madhyamika philosopher rejects our most fundamental empirical propositions and the matrix of rationality in which they are cast as matters of strictly normative and ultimately groundless belief. More specifically, according to the Madhyamika, concepts of logic, and theoretical as well as practical concepts dealing with empirical phenomena like causation, are all grounded in a particular way of life which is itself groundless. Everyday experience is empty of a fixed substratum for the justification of any type of knowledge or belief, and precisely this lack of justification--this being empty even of "emptiness"--is itself the truth of the highest meaning.[7]

Huntington explains the Madhyamika dialectic as an attack on all forms of epistemological, ontological, or metaphysical justification. That is, in saying that the world is "empty" we are led, according to Huntington, to the conclusion that the world has no ground, no substratum, no essence or a-priori justification which can be adopted rationally. And it is this lack of justification, as he says, which the Madhyamika dialectic reveals as the "highest truth."

Not surprisingly, Huntington merges the Madhyamika tradition with those thinkers in the West who share this "anti-philosophical" project. William James, Rorty, Gadamer, Derrida, Kuhn and Feyerabend are doing in the West what Nagarjuna does in India: deconstructing the philosophical penchant for absolute truth, justification, and metaphysics.

This claim that Nagarjuna sought to deconstruct all metaphysical views is perhaps the most common assertion that scholars make regarding Nagarjuna. Instead of asking

whether this is what Nagarjuna really did intend, they ask, "Is it possible to deconstruct all metaphysical views?" In trying to answer this question we are immediately led into the awkward position of either refuting such a claim, as Robinson tried to do, or defending it, as Garfield, Huntington, and others try to do. It is an awkward position because in trying to answer such a question we must think of Nagarjuna's thought in a detached way. It is as if there is *a* problem of metaphysics to which all these different philosophers, including Nagarjuna, are thinking about.

Trying to answer this question in regards Nagarjuna also leads us to think of his opponents as sharing the same philosophical vocabulary as other philosophers. In other words, in thinking that Nagarjuna was attacking "metaphysics" in general, we must think of those he criticized as doing metaphysics. Thus, the Nyaya, Vedanta, and Abhidharma traditions, for example, are not necessarily offering theories of liberation but are instead pictured as offering linguistic, metaphysical, or ontological theories.

This tendency to frame the opponents of Madhyamika in purely philosophical terms is a common practice among scholars. According to Gudmenson, for example, the Abhidharma is basically Russellian in that they were primarily concerned with isolating "sense data" in perceptual states and trying to figure out how words refer to logical bits of experience.[8] For Siderits, the Nyaya are basically "epistemological realists" in the sense that their primary goal is to forge a correspondence theory of truth;[9] For Katz, the Nyaya are denotation theorists, which for him means the following,

> The error of Nyaya is to attribute to each *svabhava*--here the anti-thesis of "dependently co-originated"--and to speak of them abstractly as such . . . To say that things have *svabhava* is to say that one can coherently speak of them apart from their everyday language, that a word has a referent, which is to say that a word is more than a convenient designation.[10]

And for Thurman, the opponents of the Madhyamika share the same type of linguistic absolutism that Wittgenstein sought to cure.

> The opponent, as the interlocutor in the PI passage, is a philosophical absolutist, a substantivist, who is "bewitched by language" into perceiving things to be absolutely true, "really real" before him, and the Wittgensteinian and Madhyamika nonegocentrist critical analyses intend to force him to look deeper into things and processes by examining his account of them to actually try to find the essence to correspond to the name, the "metaphysical entity," the "simple," the "indivisible." The century and culture spanning similarity of therapeutic technique is startling.[11]

It is not that any of these views are necessarily wrong, but in speaking of these traditions in this way we stop thinking of them in terms of soteriology and begin thinking of them in terms of general philosophical categories. The problem is then not liberation--but sense-data, epistemology, realism, linguistic reference, and absolutism.

None of these scholars deny the soteriological dimension of Nagarjuna's thought. They openly admit that the purpose of the dialectic has to do with liberation, but do so in an offhanded way. In other words, they say that the soteriological function of Nagarjuna's critique is directed against metaphysics, realism, certainty, truth, and so forth, and that it is only through realizing the futility of these latter projects that one can experience nirvana. As Mark Siderits says, "the Madhyamika holds . . . the insight that leads to liberation comes about through comprehending that all metaphysical statements are false."[12] Soteriology thus plays a role in their analysis, but only within a larger philosophical framework. For Garfield, the fundamental problem Nagarjuna addresses is essentialism and our unwillingness to accept the conventional nature of phenomena; for Huntington the problem has to do with grounding our beliefs in an objective substratum; for Siderits the problem is epistemological realism and a correspondence theory of truth;[13] for Matilal, Nagarjuna's problem is one of skepticism, i.e., doubting our claims to knowledge about the world;[14] and for thinkers like Loy and Coward the problem is a "metaphysical" view of language.[15]

The sense we get from these writers is that Nagarjuna's real problem has very little to do with soteriology. His issue is not with "theories of liberation" because liberation gets described as an after-effect of a larger philosophical issue. Gudmunsen, for example, begins his analysis of Nagarjuna by telling us how early Buddhism, like Russell, saw their enemy in terms of general philosophical issues.

> Philosophy in the grand style requires plenty of capital letters: Being, the Self, Substance, Reality, and so on. Its practitioners have to construct metaphysical systems and deal with cosmology. The truths about the universe are large, static, universal Truths on which particular facts of experience have little bearing. The Truths have a religious flavor; discovering them is a job for sages. Philosophy is constructive, not critical. Just such heavy, elaborate, authoritarian ways of thinking were the prevailing philosophical orthodoxies against which early Buddhism and Russell reacted.[16]

Gudmunsen pits the Abhidharma and Russell against "Philosophy" and against the attempt to construct "metaphysical systems." Both are concerned to deconstruct the project of "looking for ever larger and more inclusive statements about general states of affairs," by substituting an analysis of discreet facts that yields a clearer truth of the world. The problem is that neither Abhidharma nor Russell escaped from practicing "Philosophy" because they operated with similar assumptions about how language refers to objects in experience. It took Wittgenstein in the West and Nagarjuna in the East to debunk "Philosophy" by making us aware of how we use and misuse language. As he says,

> A Wittgensteinian approach (to Nagarjuna) shows that the freedom which emptiness gives is freedom from assumptions about objects--assumptions based on a certain view of language. To know that X is empty is to know something about the way we can use and misuse language about X. But of course freedom is not simply a linguistic fact. The fact that I know that X is empty is a fact of psychology rather than of language. The human importance of understanding emptiness lies in that psychological fact and in its psychological implications, even though the fact that everything is empty is a linguistic fact rather than a psychological fact.[17]

Gudmunsen's Nagarjuna tells us something about the nature of language, how it does not refer to objects in the world or describe discrete entities, and it is by understanding this that freedom is attained. Although "emptiness" is a "linguistic fact" for Gudmunsen, the psychological implications upon knowing how this "linguistic fact" works (i.e., non-referentially), entails freedom from "assumptions about objects."

The problem with Gudmunsen's treatment is how Nagarjuna's project is defined. Liberation is something that comes about only after a "correct" understanding of linguistic use. What keeps us from experiencing freedom has something to do with the way we misuse language, and if we could correct this error by understanding the way language works then we would be free. Thus, the "real" problem, as Gudmunsen sees it, is not liberation, but the way we view language. Framed in this way, it is not necessary to speak of Nagarjuna's arguments in the context of soteriological considerations, since the argument has little to do with this.

Like Gudmunsen, most of the writers I have referred to in this section succumb to the same tendency to see Nagarjuna's arguments independently from a soteriological context. They frame his arguments so that the real problem is not liberation but metaphysics, essentialism, and epistemological realism. Hence, it is possible, according to their interpretations, to judge the merit of Nagarjuna's dialectic without considering soteriology. In fact, it is easy to get the impression from many of their writings that it would be better to leave such considerations out of picture altogether and speak of Nagarjuna's "project" as basically the same as Wittgenstein's, Hume's, Derrida's, and the skeptic's.

The problem here is the way these thinkers frame Nagarjuna's project. When we take the idea of "skilful means" into consideration, it becomes difficult to make such

sweeping assertions regarding Nagarjuna's methodology, simply because the very idea of "skilful means" resists such a formalizing process. Vimalakirti became hostile with those who formalized the Dharma because for him Buddhism considers the karmic differences of individuals. He chastised the disciples for lapsing into "theory," for losing direct contact with those whom the teachings are supposed help by turning those very teachings into abstract formulas and set goals.

This happens when we say that Nagarjuna's project is to attack larger "philosophical" problem because we are forced to think of his method on a grand scale. We are forced to step back from our direct connections to others and think about what Nagarjuna is saying in more abstract terms such that his comments tell us something about the "nature" of language, or epistemological realism, or metaphysical propositions. We are forced to ask whether words really do refer to ontological bits of reality, how the mind constitutes our experience, what the relationship is between "ultimate" and "conventional" truth, and how knowledge of the world is possible.

But it was precisely this "backward" step which the Mahayana tradition attacked the Abhidharma for taking because the perspective one must adopt to take this step is too abstract: one is forced to think in terms of underlying principles, formulas, and general philosophical problems. This is considered bad "therapy" according to the Mahayana because it severs itself from the concrete sufferings of individuals.

The Mahayana response to this approach was basically to tell the Abhidharma to stop thinking of the Buddha's teachings as "theories" and begin seeing them as *upayas*: i.e., as stories, fictional devices, narratives, and therapeutic strategies. In this way, one will stop thinking of the Dharma as a set of "philosophical" descriptions and begin seeing how they arise in relation to the "diseases" of particular individuals. The Mahayana

recommendation, in effect, was to tell the Abhidharma to stop theorizing the Dharma and to start helping others.

What is missing in the diversity of views about Nagarjuna is an analysis that would put his ideas squarely within this "skilful means" tradition. This is not a common way of looking at Nagarjuna's thought in Western scholarship, and yet, as we will see in the following section, it is something that will help us understand how much of the debate surrounding Nagarjuna is misleading.

Nagarjuna the Mahayana Buddhist

As we have emphasized throughout this study, the main teaching that emerges from the Mahayana tradition is the view that Buddhism is not committed to any definite philosophical position because its goal is to help sentient being with "skilful means." Nagarjuna's indebtedness to the Mahayana is clear from his writings, where he says in many places that his main goal is to clarify the concepts for which this tradition stands. As he says in the *Twelve Gate Treatise*,

> I want to reveal and make clear the supremely great teachings of the Tathagata, Therefore, I will explain the teachings of Mahayana.[18]

Another clear example which shows Nagarjuna's indebtedness to the Mahayana tradition is found in his *Bodhisambhara(ka)*, or "The Accumulations for Enlightenment," which bears a striking resemblance to the Perfection of Insight and Vimalakirti sutras, both of which center around the idea of "skilful means."

> Prajnaparamita is the mother of Bodhisattvas, skill in means is their father, and compassion is their daughter.

> Attracting with gifts, teachings the Dharma, listening to the teaching of the Dharma, and also practicing acts of benefit to others--these are the skillful means for attracting (others).
>
> While benefiting living beings without tiring and without carelessness, (a bodhisattva) expresses his aspiration for enlightenment: To benefit others is to benefit oneself!
>
> Let us not desert living beings! In order to benefit living beings, first generate this attitude and then come to possess the practice of the doors to liberation.[19]

That Nagarjuna was operating within the Mahayana view of "skilful means" is not obvious to many scholars, most of whom focus solely on the *Mulamadhyamakakarika* and *Vigrahavyavartani*, two of his most famous texts. In limiting ourselves to only these two texts, however, we get a limited view of Nagarjuna since it means excluding those writings which reveal the diversity of Nagarjuna's literary and philosophical style. Surprisingly enough, Nagarjuna wrote to Buddhist monks, lay people, orthodox Hindus, and kings, with varying themes and philosophical motives. His writing style ranges from the simple to the complex, spanning personal devotional hymns, such as found in the *Catuhstava*, to the more philosophically abstract, such as found in the *Karikas*. The diversity of approaches Nagarjuna adopts in communicating with different types of audiences is not insignificant, since it places him directly within that "skilful means" tradition that runs from the Buddha to the Mahayana.

Chr. Lindtner is one of the few scholars to recognize the diversity in style that Nagarjuna adopts, attributing this fact to the practice of *upaya*.

> In my view, the decisive reasons for the variety of Nagarjuna's writings is to be sought in the author's desire, as a Buddhist, to address himself to various audiences at various levels and from various perspectives. This motive would of course be consistent with the Mahayana ideal of upayakausalya (skillful means). Thus, the Mulamadhyamakakarika, the Sunyatasaptati and Vigrahavyavartani were intended to be studied by philosophically minded monks. The Vaidalyaprakarana was written as a challenge to Naiyayikas. The Yuktisastika, the Nyavaharasiddi, and the Pratityasamutpadahrdayakarika as well are contributions to Buddhist

> exegesis. The Catuhstava is a document confessing its author's personal faith in the Buddha's doctrine, while the Sutrasamuccaya, the Bodhicittavivarana, the Bodhisambhara(ka), the Suhrllekha, and the Ratnavali on the whole address themselves to a wider Buddhist audience, monks as well as laymen.[20]

What is important about Lindtner's comment is that he groups all of Nagarjuna's texts under the heading "skilful means." It is not just the supposed "minor" works which are geared toward a particular audience--but even those considered his most important works, those that deal with the most difficult concepts in Buddhist philosophy, and written in terse, abstract form, such as the *Madhyamikakarika* and *Vigrahavyavartani*. What is important about this claim is that it offers a completely different insight into Nagarjuna's thought than we have dealt with so far. The contradictory interpretations, as well as the claim that Nagarjuna's methodology is an attack on all metaphysical views, did not take place on the level of "skilful means." Rather, the debates were transposed to a much "higher" plane about the nature of philosophical discourse.

Saying that all of Nagarjuna's texts are teachings about "skilful means" inverts this type of debate and turns Nagarjuna's dialectic away from general philosophical problems to problems about pedagogy and the proper way to communicate with an audience. That the highly logical dialectic of "emptiness" is on the same footing as his teachings to kings, lay people, and disciples is a significant change from treating it as a mere logical formula abstracted from the context of communicating with others. It means that "emptiness" is part of a larger "skilful means" debate rather than a philosophical debate.

The *upayic* nature of "emptiness" is clearly explained by Nagarjuna in the *Madhyamikakarika*, where he makes the following remark,

> "Empty," "non-empty," "both" or "neither"--these should not be declared.
> It is expressed only for the purpose of communication.[21]

In other words, Nagarjuna is warning us against reifying the term "emptiness" into a philosophical category. There is a reason for saying that things are "empty," just as there is a reason for saying that there is no-self, or that all phenomena are dependently arisen, and it has nothing to do with a blanket description of existence or a factual claim about how the world might be composed in the abstract. As he says, the reason for saying such things is "only for the purpose of communication," and the communication he has in mind is the type that lends itself to soteriological ends. Apart from this, "emptiness" is a meaningless term.

Saying that "emptiness" is an *upaya* should make us think twice about ascribing any theoretical or philosophical significance to this term. As we learned in the previous sections, *upaya* is primarily a heuristic or pedagogical device that the Buddha and bodhisattvas use to help sentient beings. It is an interesting pedagogical tool, however, because instead of offering set formulas or principles it calls attention to the contextual dispositions, attitudes, desires, and psychological needs of those to whom one speaks. In the context of Buddhist soteriology, *upaya* is not a theory of liberation--but a strategy for helping others. The difference between a purely theoretical approach and a "skilful means" approach is that "theory" tends toward abstraction; it leaves this particular audience and this particular person and speaks over them; it already assumes to know what the problem is before ever addressing its audience. A "skilful means" approach is just the opposite. It demands sensitivity to *this* particular context, *this* particular person, and *this* particular need, fear, and disposition. The insight of *upaya* is that to help someone you can't simply recount theoretical doctrines about the way the world is. Rather, before you speak you must have a sense of how your words will affect the person. Saying the wrong thing, or giving the wrong teaching in a certain context, may make the situation much worse. This was the insight that Vimalakirti tried to teach the Buddha's disciples. They assumed that the

"truth" of Buddhism has to do with formal principles about the nature of reality, and began teaching others without any sense of whom they were speaking to. Vimalakirti's response to this "theoretical" approach is harsh: "Without examining the spiritual faculties of living beings," he says, "one can wound those who are without wounds."[22] What Vimalakirti does is to privilege "skilful means" as the core teaching of Buddhism. It is impossible to teach the Dharma, be compassionate, or help others by being disconnected from one's audience. "Those who do not know the thought or the inclinations of others," he says, "are not able to teach the Dharma to anyone."[23] In other words, one cannot really help others attain liberation without being directly involved in their lives. An *upayic* approach is therefore different from a "theoretical" approach since it means giving up one's attachment to what one thinks is "true" in the abstract, and directing one's speech and teachings to the needs of others.

Nagarjuna's project clearly falls within the *upayic*. In the *Exposition of Bodhicitta*, or *Bodhicittavivarana*, he makes this clear by saying the following,

> The teachings of the protectors of the world accord with the (varying) resolve of living beings. The Buddhas employ a wealth of skillful means, which take many worldly forms.[24]

Nagarjuna is saying nothing new here. It was emphasized by the Buddha, the *Lotus sutra*, the *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras, and the *Vimalakirti*. What these texts express is that the ability to help others can be frustrated by attachments to "truth"--including the Buddhist truths of *sunyata*, *nirvana*, dependent arising, and so forth--and is why the bodhisattvas are depicted as using many different teachings for the sake of helping others. The fact that Nagarjuna taught to different audiences in different ways shows his devotion to this style of teaching.

Aryadeva, Nagarjuna's student, was influenced by this way of thinking, and we can see in his *Catuhsataka* how Nagarjuna's pedagogical techniques were passed on. In Chapter V of Aryadeva's root text, he says,

> A student emerges for a certain (teacher), a teacher emerges for certain (student). A person who knows the methods (*upayavid*) instructs ignorant living beings by various methods.
>
> Just as it is rare for a skilled physician not to cure patients, it is very rare for a bodhisattva who has acquired the (training) not to have (students) to be trained.[25]

And in Chapter VI of the same work, Aryadeva gives an example of this use in "skilful means."

> (A student under the influence of) desire should be treated like a servant, since harshness is its antidote. (A student under the influence of) hatred should be treated like a king, since kindness if its antidote.[26]

Arayadeva's comments not only express his commitment to Nagarjuna's style of teaching, but gives voice to an entire "skilful means" tradition that runs from the Buddha and deep into the Mahayana tradition.

In the *Madhyamikakarika*, Nagarjuna further aligns himself with this tradition of *upaya* by saying the following,

> That there is a self has been taught,
> And the doctrine of no-self.
> By the Buddhas, as well as the
> Doctrine of neither self nor nonself.[27]

All of the above passages are clear exhortations about how to think of the Buddha's "philosophy." They express the insight that the Buddha's teachings are grounded in a relational context arising from his desire to protect the world, and that because of this he

relies on various teachings. Some of these teachings include the idea that there is a self, that there is no-self, and the rejection of both alternatives. Although they appear to be contradictory teachings, it must be kept in mind that these views were not espoused independent from a pedagogical context. That is, if we remember from Chapter I of this thesis, the Buddha did in fact teach the young brahmans that there is a self, and he also taught others the exact opposite. As Nagarjuna says, however, these teachings vary depending on the "resolve of living beings," i.e., depending on the psycho-physical dispositions of those who are being instructed, and thus the contradiction is only apparent since each teaching is given to a particular person, and not in the abstract. For someone who is nihilistic about the world, it might be useful to teach a view of "self"; while for someone who is fixated with "self" it might be useful to teach "non-self"--both are remedies for a particular problem, and only make sense within a soteriological context. This is also what Nagarjuna means when he says in the Karikas,

> Everything is real and is not real,
> Both real and not real,
> Neither real nor not real,
> This is the Lord Buddha's teaching.[28]

This passage is clearly a "skilful means" teaching, but is interpreted differently by Madhyamika scholars. Wood and Garfield have opposite readings of this passage, neither of which speak of it in the context of "skilful means." For Wood, the point Nagarjuna is trying to prove has to do with the supposed contradictions between "existence and nonexistence"--which then leads Nagarjuna to deny that anything exists at all, i.e., nihilism. For Garfield, on the other hand, the above passage, like many others of this kind in the Karikas, is part of Nagarjuna's argument for the conventional nature of phenomena. As he says,

> This is the positive tetralemma regarding existence. Everything is conventionally real. Everything is ultimately unreal (that is, not unreal in just any sense, but unreal when seen from the ultimate standpoint). Everything has both characteristics--that is, everything is both conventionally real and ultimately unreal. Nothing is ultimately real or completely nonexistent. That is, everything is neither real in one sense nor non-real in another sense.[29]

The problem with such readings is that they have little to do with "skilful means." Wood sees Nagarjuna as completely lacking any soteriological purpose, which is why Nagarjuna is described by him as a nihilist; while Garfield treats such passages about what is "real" and "unreal" by inserting the qualifiers "conventionally" and "ultimately" before each respective word. His reason for doing this is to make Nagarjuna's statements logically and philosophically consistent--that is, to bring out the constructive side of Nagarjuna's thought which has to do with describing the conventional nature of phenomena. What both views suffer from is the tendency to turn Nagarjuna's thought away from the soteriological in which it makes sense to give, as Vimalakirti and the Buddha did, "contradictory" teachings.

We are now in a better position to ask about the meaning of "emptiness." It was already noted how Nagarjuna thought of it as a means of communication. That is, one should not speak of things being "empty" or "non-empty" apart from how it functions within a soteriological context. In the *Hymn to the Inconceivable (Buddha)*, or *Acintyastava*, Nagarjuna makes the following remark,

> The Ultimate truth is the teaching that things are without own-being. This is the unsurpassed medicine for those consumed by the fever of *svabhava*.[30]

Here Nagarjuna states his famous two-way relation between ultimate truth and emptiness. It is because all things arise due to causes and conditions, and hence are dependently originated, that they lack "own-being," or substantial existence. If things

existed substantially then they would be independent, but since nothing can be found to exist in this way, all things are interdependently related, and hence "empty." And this, says, Nagarjuna, is the "ultimate truth."

Although the first sentence in the above passage appears to advance the idea of emptiness as a factual claim about reality, it is immediately followed with its *upayic* counterpart which undermines our ability to read it in this way. That "emptiness" is a medicine tells us that we should not adopt it as a philosophical description about the nature of reality: it is a heuristic device, used to counter an extreme form of attachment, and not an "ultimate truth" in the way we might ordinarily think of it.

We should pause and reflect upon what is being said here. Emptiness is "a medicine," and, as Nagarjuna says, this medicine is equivalent to "ultimate truth." The easiest way to read this is to say that Nagarjuna thinks he's discovered a panacea for all possible ills. Emptiness, he might be saying, will cure everything.

This is the way the writers we have spoken of in this section tend to view it. They see Nagarjuna as offering a remedy against all philosophical problems. Each thinker takes "emptiness" in his own way as a panacea: it not only diagnoses *the* fundamental illness in philosophy (realism, metaphysics, essentialism, etc.) but also cures this problem through the deconstruction of *svabhava*, (which can either mean the desire for an objective truth, a metaphysical realm, epistemological justification, or a substance view of things). The medicine Nagarjuna speaks of, in other words, cures us through the realization that everything is "empty," or as Siderits says, through the realization that "the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth."

The "illness" which these writers see Nagarjuna trying to cure is thus a certain philosophical disease that Hume, the Buddha, Wittgenstein, and Sextus have all diagnosed

as well. These "philosophers" not only speak the same therapeutic message, but they are trying to cure a similar problem.

> The goal is to cure the philosopher of the confusion attendant upon the fundamental misconceptions underlying dogmatism--that underlying any reasonable practice must be some set of certain propositions, and that underlying those propositions must be some convention-independent, ontologically given reality. Such misconceptions engender endless sophistical dialectic and block clear thinking about language, explanation, morality, and ontology.[31]

There are problems with the panacea approach, however. It wants to attack what it calls "metaphysics," but turns out to be just as sweeping as what it argues against. Its reductionism is apparent in the assumption that Nagarjuna has located the underlying illness that Plato, Nyaya, Descartes, and Abhidharma all suffer from. Hence, if everyone, or at least if all philosophers, could realize "emptiness" then they would all be cured.

If this is what Nagarjuna is saying when he refers to "emptiness" as a medicine, then, like Vimalakirti's disciples, he has formalized the Dharma by preaching a remedy without knowing anything about his audience. As a physician, he would already assume to know what the problem is without ever consulting his patient. What motivated Vimalakirti to reproach the disciples, however, was the insight that this approach is not good medicine.

It is not good medicine because it is not *upayic*, i.e., it is not grounded in the particular needs, fears, and dispositions of *this* particular "sick" person. To preach "emptiness" without having the slightest understanding of the karmic dispositions of others, Vimalakirti would say, is to lose sight of what the Dharma is all about.

But perhaps Nagarjuna is not such a terrible physician after all. We have already noted his indebtedness to the Mahayana view of "skilful means" by pointing to those passages in which he refers to the methodology of Buddhist teachings. Sometimes the Buddha teaches the doctrine of "self" and sometimes the doctrine of "non-self"; sometimes

he teaches that "everything is real" and sometimes that "everything is not real." The Buddha "employs a wealth of skilful means" he says, "which take many worldly forms." And this is because he recognizes the varying "resolve of living beings." The point to glean from such statements is that Nagarjuna is fully aware the *upayic* content of the Buddha's teachings, and he wants to re-emphasize this point against those, like the Abhidharmists, who cling to Buddhism as an absolute truth. When he asserts the medicinal nature of "emptiness" he is making this point, and is also why he says that its purpose is only for "communication."

What, then, does Nagarjuna means when he says that "emptiness" is an "unsurpassed medicine"? Put within the context of the Mahayana sutras, Nagarjuna's statement is not as complex as it seems. Rather than pointing to the conventionality of phenomena, an anti-realist, anti-metaphysical, or anti-essentialistic stance, the Mahayana view is that such teachings about "emptiness," nirvana, samsara, self, non-self, "ultimate" and "mundane" truths, are none other than "skilful means" used within a particular context. What this means is that they are *not* descriptions about the nature of reality, propositions, logical statements, or truth claims. Rather, they are *upayas*--medicines--and their curative force depends precisely upon the type of disease that one has. To treat "emptiness" non-medicinally is to take it as a formulaic principle, something that can be abstracted and applied to all problems. As Nagarjuna says in the Karikas, however,

> By a misperception of emptiness
> A person of little intelligence is destroyed.
> Like a snake incorrectly seized
> Or like a spell incorrectly cast.[32]

What he says here is not unlike Vimalakirti's admonition to his disciples when he tells them not to preach "emptiness" as a static truth, or else one "can wound those who are

without wounds." In other words, "emptiness" is not a panacea, and should not be preached independently from the context of a certain disease. Just as the Buddha's teaching of "non-self" does not take place without knowing the problem to be cured, so "emptiness" should not be taught without knowing the problem. And this knowledge can only come about, as the Mahayanist emphasizes, through an *upayic* engagement in the lives of others.

The thinkers I have been referring to in this section, however, tend to take "emptiness" in a non-*upayic* way: i.e., they turn it into a "theory." This may sound like an unfair charge, given that most of these thinkers see Nagarjuna's use of "emptiness" as the deconstruction of all metaphysical theories, views, and doctrines. For them, the "fever of *svabhava*" is a philosophical disease: it gets in the way of living a good life, experiencing *nirvana*, or overcoming attachment. Philosophers theorize about causality and the structure of the universe, they posit fixed essences and hidden powers to explain human behavior, they privilege rational thinking and consciousness as the highest form of life, and they attempt to prove their theories by appealing to universally valid and objective criteria. Nagarjuna deconstructs such projects by showing attacking the idea of *svabhava*, and by showing how it is logically impossible to ground one's philosophical view in an essentialistic way. Thus, if Nagarjuna is anti-theoretical in this sense, my claim that these thinkers have turned his ideas into a "theory" seems unfair.

But it is precisely this way of thinking that I am trying to address. The move from explaining Nagarjuna's ideas in terms of particular philosophical projects to explaining it in terms of *all* philosophical projects is misleading. It gives us the impression that Nagarjuna is thinking about issues that have nothing to do with liberation and that he is interested in the same types of problems that other traditional Western philosophers find puzzling. Although Nagarjuna seems "anti-theoretical" according to their accounts, he is in fact read through a highly theoretical lens, a lens that sees issues in terms of the "nature" of

essentialsim, or the "nature" of metaphysical thinking, or the "nature" of theory itself. In other words, Nagarjuna, the "anti-philosopher," looks very "traditional" on this account because he approaches the problems of philosophy from a very abstract perspective.

Thus, the problem is not one of abstracting Nagarjuna's methodology and applying to other philosophical problems, but seeing his argument in purely formalistic terms. Think for a moment how Robinson expresses the dialectic of "emptiness." In his article, "Some Logical aspects of Nagarjuna's System," Robinson identifies the syllogistic forms of Nagarjuna's arguments (*modus ponens* and *modus tollens*) and explains the fallacies Nagarjuna commits by translating his arguments into symbolic form. Here are three of Robinson's translations of Nagarjuna's tetralemma into logical notation.

1. {Ax v -Ax v Ax. -Ax v -(Ax). - -(Ax)}
2. "a," "-a," "a-a," "-(a-a)"
3. ab =0
   ab =0
   ab ≠0. ab ≠0
   ab = 0. ab = 0.[33]

Putting Nagarjuna's arguments in this way allows Robinson to focus on what he calls Nagarjuna's "dialectical apparatus," clarifying its most significant moments by devoting entire sections to "Negation," "Quantification," and "Dilemmas." Robinson says in the article that notational statement "avoids the pitfals and awkwardness of linguistic statement and rhetorical logic," and he concludes with a recommendation that all of Nagarjuna's *Karikas* be transcribed into modern symbolic form.

> This article has made relatively slight use of the resources of modern logic, but it is possible to transcribe the *Karikas* entirely, chapter by chapter, into logical notation, thus bringing to light formal features which do not appear from the consideration of examples taken out of context and listed topically. In short, the logical analysis of Nagarjuna is far from complete.[34]

Framed in this way, it is not necessary to speak of Nagarjuna's arguments in the context of soteriological considerations, since the argument has nothing to do with liberation. Rather, it's about propositions, sentence variables, logical notation, and formal analysis. In such a process, the rhetorical context of Nagarjuna's argument is completely lost. To lose this context is for Robinson a good thing, since "rhetorical arguments" are "pitfals" to be avoided: they stand in the way of clarity. Arguing primarily against the "mystical" interpretation of Nagarjuna, Robinson succeeded perhaps more than any other Madhyamika scholar in drawing our attention to the purely "logical aspects of Nagarjuna's system." As Andrew Tuck notes,

> As Murti and Stcherbatsky had done for their generation, Robinson succeeded in advancing Nagarjuna's prestige among the analytically minded scholars of a later *Zeitgeist*. By down playing Murti's portrayal of Nagarjuna as a mystic and a philosophical idealist, Robinson actually continued the program by drawing attention to Nagarjuna as one of the central figures of Asian history . . . Although Murti and Stcherbatsky had concentrated their attentions on "emptiness" (*sunyata*) as the mysterious, central term in the Madhyamika canon, Robinson turned his analytic scrutiny to the form of the Nagarjunian dialectic and the role of conceptual analysis. Nagarjuna, the idealist, become Nagarjuna, the logician.[35]

Summary

Not all the writers I referred to in this section see Nagarjuna as simply another logician, but they do share Robinson's view that Nagarjuna was arguing against "Philosophy"--i.e., that he sought to deconstruct metaphysical speculation, totalizing systems, essentialism, or epistemological realism. Like Robinson, they see "Philosophy" as getting in the way of thinking clearly both about Buddhism and the world.

As much as these thinkers want to escape "Philosophy," however, they seem to perpetuate the exact same problem in the way they speak of Nagarjuna's methodology. The dialectic of "emptiness" becomes a formula in their hands: it frees us from a "referential

view of language," from the belief in ultimate, ontological realms, from "Truth," "secret powers," and metaphysical speculation. Rather than escaping "Philosophy" this approach seems to continue the "traditional" practice of abstract, "theoretical" thought. Helping others overcome suffering, on this view, has more to do with adopting a system of criticism, a system that undercuts our misuse of language, logic, and perceptions, than direct engagement in the lives of those who suffer.

But it is precisely this approach to Buddhist methodology that the practice of "skilful means" resists. If we can see Nagarjuna as continuing this *upayic* tradition that runs from the Buddha and through the *Vimalakirti*, then we will see the exact point in which the debates about Nagarjuna were led astray. They see him as anti-theoretical in all respects, as an anti-metaphysician, a deconstructionist, and a Skeptic; in short, they see him as a philosopher who is concerned less with articulating a vision of *upaya* and more concerned with breaking apart conceptual, linguistic, and epistemological structures. In framing his views like this, we are led to think of him not only in theoretical terms, but even more importantly is that we must think of his methodology, his *upayic* use of "emptiness," as a mere logical formula that can be applied to any philosophical, religious, or personal problem. The irony in this approach is that it is exactly this way of thinking that Nagarjuna, like the Buddha and the character Vimalakirti before him, struggled against.

The important question we need to ask, however, is this: what is the problem or the illness that Nagarjuna wants to address? If "emptiness" is a medicine, and a medicine that only functions within a specific discourse, then who, specifically, is Nagarjuna speaking to when he says that "all things are empty"? Many scholars assume that he's addressing a "universal" audience, or that "emptiness" applies to almost every problem in life--or at least to the problems in philosophy. To see why this is mistaken, we need to get a clear view of

Nagarjuna's audience, the problem that Nagarjuna thinks they suffer from, and what, specifically, he thinks needs to be cured.

NOTES

[1] T.R.V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, (George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1955), p. 130-131.

[2] In response to the Nyaya objection that the assertion about the "emptiness of inherent nature" is itself a positive proposition, Nagarjuna says, "If I had any proposition (*pratijna*), this defect (*dosa*) would be mine. I have, however, no proposition. Therefore, there is no defect that is mine. If I had any proposition, then the defect previously stated by you would be mine, because it would affect the specific character of my proposition. (But) I have no proposition," *Vigrahavyavartani*, Bhattacharya, trans., *The Dialectical Method of Nagarjuna* (Motilal Banarsidass, 1978).

[3] Richard Robinson, "Did Nagarjuna Really Refute All Metaphysical Views," *Philosophy East and West* Vol 22, (1972): 325-331.

[4] Ibid., p. 325.

[5] Jay Garfield, "Epoche and Sunyata: Skepticism East and West, *Philosophy East and West*, Vol 40 (1990): 295-307.

[6] Jay Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 88.

[7] C. W. Huntington, Jr., *The Emptiness of Emptiness*, (University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1989.), p. 10.

[8] Chris Gudmunsen, *Wittgenstein and Buddhism*, (The Macmillan Press Ltd. 1977).

[9] Mark Siderits, "Nagarjuna as Anti-Realist," *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 16 (1988).

[10] Nathan Katz, "Nagarjuna and Wittgenstein on Error," in *Buddhist and Western Philosophy*, ed. Nathan Katz (New Delhi: Sterling, 1981), p. 303-319.

[11] Robert Thurman, "Philosophical nonegocentrism in Wittgenstein and Candrakirti in their Treatment of the Private Language Problem," *Philosophy East and West*, Vol 30, (1980): p. 326-327.

[12] Mark Siderits, "Thinking on Empty: Madhyamaka Anti-Realism and Canons of Rationality," in *Rationality in Question*, Shlomo Biderman, ed., (E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1989), p. 231-250.

[13] Mark Siderits, "Nagarjuna as Anti-Realist," *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 16, (1988) p. 311-325.

[14] See, for example, B. M. Matilal, *Perception: An Essay in Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.50-54.

[15] See, for example, Harold Coward, *Derrida and Indian Philosophy*, (New York; State University of New York Press, 1990); and David Loy, "The Cloture of Deconstruction: A Mahayana Critique of Derrida," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 27 (1987): p. 59-80

[16] Chris Gudmunsen, *Wittgenstein and Buddhism*, (The Macmillan Press Ltd. 1977).

[17] Ibid., p. 52.

[18] Nagarjuna, *Twelve Gate Treatise*, Hsueh-li Cheng, trans., (D. Reidel Boston, 1982), p. 53-54.

[19] Nagarjuna, *Bodhisambhara(ka);* Chr. Lindtner, trans., *Masters of Wisdom* (Dharma Publishing, 1986), p. 127-135.

[20] Chr. Lindtner, *Master of Wisdom,* (Dharma Publishing, 1986), p. 331.

[21] Nagarjuna, *Madhyamakakarika*, Ch XXII; 11, David Kalupahana, trans., *Nagarjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way*, (State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 307.

[22] *Vimalakirtinirdesa*, Robert Thurman, trans., (Penn State University Press, 1986) p.51.

[23] Ibid., p. 82

[24] Nagarjuna, *Bodhicittavivarana*, Chr. Lindtner, trans., *Master of Wisdom* (Dharma Publishing, 1986), p. 65.

[25] Aryadeva, *Catuhsataka*, Karen Lang, trans., (Narayana Press, 1986), p. 57.

[26] Ibid., p. 65.

[27] Nagarjuna, *Madhyamakakarika*, Ch XVIII; 6, Jay Garfield, trans., *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 49.

[28] Ibid., Ch XVIII: 8., p. 49.

[29] Jay Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 250.

[30] Nagarjuna, *Acintyastava*,.Chr. Lindtner, trans., *Master of Wisdom*, (Dharma Publishing, 1986), p. 29.

[31] Jay Garfield, "Epoche and Sunyata: Skepticism East and West," *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 40, (1990): p. 295-307.

[32] Nagarjuna, *Madhyamakakarika*, Ch XXIV; 11, Jay Garfield, trans., *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 68.

[33] Richard Robinson, "Some Logical Aspects of Nagarjuna's System," *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 27 (1977), p. 3-21.

[34] Ibid., p. 17.

[35] Andrew Tuck, *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship*, (Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 64.

CHAPTER VII

THE UNSURPASSED MEDICINE: NAGARJUNA, EMPTINESS, AND UPAYA

Introduction

The fundamental problem of every major Indian tradition centers around the issue of liberation. Although it is sometimes useful to speak of Buddhist epistemology, Nyaya logic, or Abhidharma metaphysics, independently from a soteriological context, we do a disservice to these tradition if we frame their problems solely in philosophical terms. During both the Buddha's and Nagarjuna's time there were widespread debates on issues such as the nature of reality, the possibility and extent of pure knowledge, the usefulness of logic, language, and ethics. What we need to keep in mind, however, is that such debates were always about larger soteriological issues. Hence, the arguments between the Buddhists and Nyayins, for example, is not simply an argument about the extent of human knowledge or the valid means of cognition, but has to do with how knowledge and cognition function to lead someone to escape from *samsara*. What we need to keep in mind is that though it might make sense, in certain contexts, to speak of these traditions as offering ontological, epistemological, or metaphysical theories, they are really theories about liberation.

Nagarjuna's thought is not only situated within the context of problems about liberation, but is a direct response to liberation as it is conceived by the Indian traditions in general. His major works take up almost every prevailing doctrine in Buddhist and non-

Buddhist traditions, from the Abhidharma, Jain, and Carvaka traditions, to the Hindu Vedanta, Samkhya, and Nyaya, and what Nagarjuna finds problematic is that they all seem to share a common assumption regarding the way to achieve liberation. Even though the various tradition ranging from Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain offer what seem to be contradictory visions about what liberation is, they all nevertheless assume that the only way to get there is through knowing what the world is like. Whether liberation was defined in terms of *nirvana*, union with Brahman, detachment from the physical (*Prakriti*), a life of duty, (*dharma*), or, to some extent, pure pleasure, every major tradition operated with the assumption that the only way to experience life's end was "to know" just what type of world we live in. Hence, one had to know whether Brahman was fundamentally One or Many, whether the world had an eternal substance underlying it or whether it was instead a flow of elementary particles, whether the soul was something that would unite with God or simply "commune" with God, whether *Purusha* was identical to or different form *Prakriti*, and what happens to the individual after the death.

Another way of putting this is to say that it was considered impossible to attain salvation without first adopting a correct view of the world. Why was this? Because, as in most traditional Indian philosophical systems, knowledge is the sole means by which one is able to break free from the chains of *samsara*. The problems of existence stem from ignorance in almost every Indian tradition, offering up veils of fleeting images, illusions, dream-like experiences, and, ultimately, suffering. Hence, as the problems in existence stem from ignorance, they can only solved through knowledge.

It is this view of liberation that Nagarjuna wants to criticize. All of these traditions are offering "theories of liberation"--that is, they not only see knowledge as a necessary requirement for overcoming suffering, but they "map out" the proper way to get there. One must meditate on the causes of suffering in order to overcome suffering, or one must know

Brahman through insight (*vidya*) in order to become Brahman, or one must know that the world is either eternal, non-eternal, impermanent, or determinately fixed in order to live a good life. For Nagarjuna, however, such "theories" or "views" (*drsti*) are irrelevant. He wants to say that these traditions are going about it in the wrong way, that the idea that one needs a certain conception of the world or theoretical "map" in order to attain happiness or, ultimately, to help others, is absurd. Though each tradition is trying in its own way to cure the ills of existence--they all nevertheless suffer from an illness themselves. This is the problem, the "sickness," that Nagarjuna's "emptiness" seeks to cure.

To see the problem Nagarjuna wants to address more clearly, let's briefly examine some instances of the "theoretical" approach to liberation within the Hindu and Abhidharma traditions. After this, we will breifly examine the historical Buddha's response to the "sixty views" regarding liberation, and lastly, we will look at some specific passages from Nagarjuna's *Karikas* in which he responds to the Abhidharma tradition.

Liberation in Classical Hinduism

If there is one element that unites the six orthodox schools of Hinduism it is the belief that freedom is achieved through knowledge. Without knowledge there is no hope to overcome suffering, experience freedom or attain salvation. Knowledge is considered crucial in these traditions because the problems of existence, e.g., suffering, are rooted in ignorance, false beliefs, and erroneous perceptions, and can only be overcome by a type of knowledge that destroys these hindrances. The type of reality that is supposed to be known differs from one Hindu tradition to the next, but they all nevertheless agree with the basic premise that knowledge is necessary for liberation.

The ideas of the *Upanishads*, and the Vedanta interpretations which sustained them, give one of the clearest voices to a metaphysical understanding of the world that requires

vidya, or knowledge, to attain release from *samsara*.. The central teaching that develops form its texts is the idea of an underlying spiritual principle, *Brahman*, which is infused and supportive of all things. Brahman is described in the *Upanishads* as *sat-cit-ananda*, "being, intelligence, and bliss."[1] It is undifferentiated and unitary, unchanging, eternal, and the ultimate ground of all of multiplicity and change. The goal of the Upanishadic and Vedanta tradition is to realize *Brahman*, and begins with the understanding that one's true self, *Atman*, is not part of the transient phenomena that we experience on a day-to-day level, and is therefore not identical to our perceptions, sensations, or everyday cognitions. To realize *Brahman* as undifferentiated entails leaving behind the apparent "dualities" that encompass our ordinary ways of experiencing the world. "For where there is a duality," says the famous seer, Yajnavalkya, in the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*,

> there one sees another; there one smells another; there one hears another; there one speaks to another, there one thinks another; there one understands another.[2]

The basic goal of the *Upanishads* is to experience a point in which knower and known become existentially identical, "one without a second." Beyond the duality of knower and known, perceiver and perceived, thinker and what is thought, lies the true Self, *Atman*, the fundamental locus of our identity--and, somewhat paradoxically, the same as *Brahman*. In other words, our true self is not to be identified with the flux of phenomenal experience that we encounter on a day-to-day level--but is the very source of existence itself, pure Being, *Brahman*. The unity of *Atman* and *Brahman* is expressed in many places throughout the *Upanishads*, but finds its clearest expression in the famous statement "*Tat tvam asi*," ("That are thou") taught by Uddalaka to his son.

"Believe me, my dear, that which is the finest essence--this whole world has that as its self. That is Reality. That is *Atman*. That are thou (*Tat tvam asi*)"[3]

Upon realizing the unity of *Atman* and *Brahman* liberation is achieved. "He verily, who knows that supreme *Brahman*, becomes very *Brahman*," says the *Mundaka Upanishad*,[4] and in becoming *Brahman* one "becomes" pure Being, "one without a second," the unchanging and immutable source of all existence. This is the state of the *jivan mukta*, the liberated person, beyond birth and death, suffering, earthly desires, and ignorance.

When he has been comprehended by the thought "He is"
His real nature manifests itself.
When are liberated all
The desires that lodge in one's heart,
Then a mortal becomes immortal!
Therein he reaches *Brahman*!
When are cut all
The knots of the heart here on earth,
Then a mortal becomes immortal![5]

The key to understanding the Vedanta tradition that supports the *Upanishads* lies in the way it privileges knowledge. From Badarayana's *Vedanta Sutra* to Sankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva, knowledge of *Brahman* is the only way to experience the "non-dual" reality which the *Upanishads* articulate. The knowledge of which they speak is not conceptual or cognitive knowledge, however, as *Brahman* is beyond every conceivable category which the rational mind seeks to impose upon the world. Rather, the Vedanta philosophers speak of a type of knowledge (*vidya*) that is intuitive and non-conceptual, more direct and immediate than the inferential modes of logic. As P. T. Raju expresses it:

From the point of view of religion as spiritual life, all the Vedantic schools are philosophies of self-realization. Their common exhortation, like that of Socrates, is:

> 'Know thy self.' This exhortation is not meant merely for ethical self-realization, but for spiritual self-realization and salvation. Salvation is not possible without the realization of the Supreme Spirit, which can be known not through the senses and mind, but through the one's own self.[6]

The privileged status of knowledge in the Upanishadic tradition is exclusive. Without *vidya*, which is the direct, intuitive insight into the nature of reality, one remains lost in the transmigratory cycles of birth and death, pain and suffering. Even ethical conduct, such as following one's *dharma* or practicing holy rituals, will not facilitate the *Atman/Brahman* unity, since its metaphysical nature, as uncaused and eternally pure, does not participate within the causal relations of space and time.

The other Hindu *Darsanas*, except perhaps the Yoga tradition, share this Vedanta view regarding knowledge. Whether it be the "Absolute Non-Dualism" of Sankara's Advaita Vedanta, the dualism of Isvara Krsna's Samkhya, the epistemological and logical based philosophy of Nyaya , or the atomic pluralism of the Vaisesika, the same message is repeated throughout: without knowledge there is no liberation. The primacy of knowledge is expressed by the famous contemporary Indian philosopher and Advaitist, Radhakrishnan, in the following way:

> Every Indian system seeks the truth, not as academic "knowledge for its own sake," but to learn the truth which shall make men free...It is not the view that truth is measured in terms of the practical, but rather that the truth is the only sound guide for practice, that truth alone has efficacy as a guide for man in his search for salvation. Every major system of Indian philosophy takes its beginning from the practical and tragic problems of life and searches for the truth in order to solve the problem of man's distress in the world in which he finds himself.[7]

Radhakrishnan's comments about the necessity of truth, and about how truth precedes practice, highlights the main tendency in Indian thought to assume that truth and knowledge are the necessary blueprints for living a good life. Even the materialist Carvaka tradition which rejected the Vedas, the *Darsanas* , as well as the Jain and Buddhist

positions, assumed that if we simply stick to what we "know" to be true, i.e., the physical reality that comes to us through sense perception, then we will not be lead astray by abstract metaphysical principles, and, subsequently, we will be able to experience as much pleasure as possible; which, for Carvaka, is the only end in life that we can ever hope to know.

The main thrust of Nagarjuna's philosophical project is to reveal the absurdity in this entire way of thinking about knowledge and practice that permeates the Indian tradition. The way he goes about this is to critique the metaphysical basis which underlies the claim to knowledge--to deconstruct, in a sense, the underlying picture or representation of the world, and to show how it is unintelligible. By undercutting the metaphysical basis on which the primacy of knowledge rests, Nagarjuna tries to reveals the absurdity in the claim that one must know how the world is constituted in order to attain liberation.

To understand how Nagarjuna does this we need to get a clearer example of the types of views he is attacking. Since one of his primary targets were the Buddhists themselves, it might be helpful for our purpose to see how he attacks the Abhidharma tradition. By focusing on this debate, we should get a clearer idea as to what he is up to.

Liberation in Abhidharma

It is evident in the way the Abhidharma thinkers treated the Buddha's teachings that they deviated little from the main current of Indian thought. It should be recalled from Chapter 2 that the Abhidharma scholars distinguished between those teachings of the Buddha which dealt with popular sayings, which they termed *Suttas*, and those which dealt with pure philosophical analysis, called *abhidhamma*. This separation between these two "baskets" was both ontological and epistemological, in that it signified on the hand two different realms of being, the everyday "conventional" world versus the concrete particulars

(*dharmas*) underlying it, and on the other hand two different modes of knowing the nature of reality, i.e., either conventionally or ultimately. To apprehend reality "conventionally" meant to accept the world simply *as it appears*, i.e., to think that what we perceive on an everyday level is fundamentally real. This was considered a form of false knowledge according to the Abhidharma scholars, since it fails to discern that underlying our everyday perceptions of things (e.g. chairs, trees, desks, people, etc.) are finer, more particular units, the *dharmas*, which make them up. To accept things only "conventionally" keeps one in *samsaric* bondage, since it means being attached to that which is ultimately non-existent. On the other hand, to perceive the world in terms of *dharmas* is "ultimate" knowledge, since it was here that one was able to grasp not only the bare particulars that makes up the world--and hence unattached to the larger wholes of everyday life--but one was then in a position to see the very workings of causality which give rise to attachment , and hence suffering, in the first place. By perceiving the causal interdependence of *dharmas* one was then able to completely "extinguish" the grip such a process has on our lives, and achieve liberation.

The manner in which the Nikaya scholars theorized about the abhidharma treatises is problematic. In their view, the non-discursive analysis of the world which the *abhidharma* expresses was considered not only an "ultimate truth"--in the sense that it revealed the fundamental workings of reality--but more significant was their claim that an analysis of the *dharmas* was the only way to attain nirvana. Without understanding how *dharmas* arise and cease, what their nature (*svabhava*) is composed of, how they condition other things, and how they are related through subtle relays of causes and effects, it was considered impossible to attain salvation.

With this view in mind, the different Abhidharma traditions began an extensive process of delineating and classifying the different types of *dharmas*, their characteristics,

and the types of causal inter-relations which hold them all together. The vast metaphysical system that is found in the *Abhidharma* texts stems largely from the privileged position that knowledge holds in this tradition.

The process of determining a precise metaphysic was not as easy task for the Abhidharma thinkers, however, and they quickly became divided over which ontological view was correct. The debates between these schools were outlined in chapter two, and so only a brief review should suffice. The issue that divides them centers primarily around the problem of causation. That is, if all things are impermanent and transitory, as the Buddha said, then what type of causal connection can be found to explain the process of *dharmas* changing from one moment to the next? The most significant answer to this question came from the two leading Nikaya traditions, the Sarvastivadin and the Sautrantika, each contradicting the other.

The Sarvastivadins explained causality by saying that all things are composed of substances that remain the same through the process of change. What we see changing and moving through the three time periods are but the "conditions" or accidents of a thing, while underlying this are the *dharmas* true nature, their substance, or *svabhava*, which remains unaltered from one moment to the next. The reasoning behind this seems to be the view that without some identifiable substance or quality underlying the *dharmas* it would not be possible to account the continuity of experience. In other words, even though the objects of experience are constantly changing, they are not discontinuous or radically distinct: objects change and yet also remain the same. Thus, there must be something distinguishable quality, some essence that not explains causality but also allows us to recognize on an everyday level the continuity of experience. This underlying quality is what they termed a *dharma's* "self nature," and is also what became the prime object of knowledge in meditative practice. To know a *dharma's* "self nature" as opposed to its mere

"accidents" meant that one would no longer be held captive by that which is "turbulent" and full of unrest, no longer attached to the fleeting appearances of the everyday causal network--but instead secure in that knowledge of essence that is "calm" and "peaceful"--i.e., nirvana. The ability to discriminate, and hence "to know", the distinct qualities of *dharmas*, between its "self nature" and its conditioned properties, was therefore tantamount to liberation.

The Sautrantika's criticized the above view for reverting to the type of *Atman*-like universe that the Buddha rejected, and, in their opposition, advanced an altogether different position regarding change. Instead of an underlying substance, the Sautrantikas claimed that all things are like continuous "flashings" in time; *dharmas* arise and cease each moment, they come from nowhere, "flash" for an instant, and then vanish. There is no causal substance underlying all things because, as the Buddha said, all things are impermanent and transitory, without "self," forever coming into existence and dying. Hence, one's own personal experiences are no different: perceptions, impressions, feelings, and conscious states are but a series of temporary "flashings"--spontaneous emissions that fade almost as soon as they were born. To see this process--to know it--was the goal of meditative practice that ends in liberation.

Though the emphasis on knowledge in the Sautrantika is the same as it is in the Sarvastivadin tradition, the object to be known is quite different. Rather than an underlying essence, one is supposed to "watch" the flow of phenomenal experience--and with that comes the liberating knowledge which is no longer rooted in the erroneous perceptions of stasis, no longer attached to that which merely "appears" permanent.

What all these traditions share is a certain way of conceptualizing liberation. They all assume that enlightenment, *nirvana*, *moksha*, happiness, compassion, and the ability to help others escape *samsara* is attained through a formal structure, a definite "path" or

clearly conceived "theory" that will show us the way. The emphasis on knowledge is so important in these traditions because they assume that there is one "sickness"--and one "cure"--and that in discovering this cure (non-attachment, "emptiness," *Brahman*, *Prakriti*, causal impermanence, *dharmic* temporality, etc.) we will all be liberated. Hence the necessity of knowing exactly what the problem is, and how to solve it.

That part of Buddhism which places a high value on *upaya*, however, and of which Nagarjuna is a part, sees this approach as suffering from an illness of its own. Because the idea of *upaya* begins with the assumption that individuals are karmicly different, that their actions, psychology, and dispositions have been formed by experience that are in many respects unique and deeply contextual, it resists a "theory of liberation" that fails to take these karmic differences into account. In constructing a "theory" or "view" (*drsti*) of liberation, these traditions have abstracted themselves from the concrete, particular differences of individuals and risen above them. In doing so, it has defeated its purpose of helping others. *Upaya* tells us that a formal account of liberation more harmful than benefitial; it tells us that to approach others with the intent of "showing the way" by handing them a doctrine or theoretical "map" of the universe is a form of blindness. To see through the eyes of the Buddha, on the other hand--to be a "great physician"--is to look into the eyes of those who suffer and see what ails them. It means seeing the context and the dispositions of those whom you face. No "theory" of liberation is needed for this act; only the bodhisattvic desire to help.

To show how Nagarjuna tries to critique this approach, we will focus our attention primarily on Nagarjuna's *Karikas*, and show how it is trying to recapture Buddha's own approach to this very same issue. What should become clear in this section is this: just as the Buddha's pedagogical style is wound up with the idea of "rafts"--so Nagarjuna's critique is wound up with the larger Mahayana notion of "skilful means," and that it is

through this idea of "skilful means" that Nagarjuna tries to shift the debate away from "theories of liberation" to the more practical job of helping others.

Emptiness as Upaya

One of Nagarjuna's primary goals in the *Karikas* was to show that the Buddhist terms and categories--dependent arising, causality, nirvana, and so on--are not theoretical terms that refer to something in the world. He tries to show in many places that by taking these terms as descriptive of an underlying ontology or metaphysics we are led into unresolvable contradictions. Hence, Buddhist metaphysics is undermined at every step by Nagarjuna: the Four Noble Truths, dependent arising, nirvana, and so on, are all "empty."

But Nagarjuna also warns against the desire to imbue "emptiness" with theoretical significance. Even "emptiness" is "empty" of inherent nature, meaning that it lacks descriptive content. Its force is primarily negative, in the sense that it takes away our propensity for theoretical abstraction. Hence, to think that "emptiness" points to a mystical realm, the conventionality of all things, or nihilism, is to take "emptiness" as pointing to something in the world, as describing or defining the nature of existence; i.e., as a theory. The "emptiness of emptiness," however, excludes this approach. We should no more think of "emptiness" as a theory than we should of nirvana, causality, or the Four Noble truths in this way, for all of them are "empty" of inherent nature.

For Nagarjuna, "emptiness" is primarily a curative device, an *upaya*, that is used to counter the idea that liberation is contingent upon a theoretical understanding of the world . But Nagarjuna's attack on a "theory of liberation" has little to do with whether it is "true" or "false." The shift from "theory" does not take place at the level of what is factual or non-factual, real or unreal. For Nagarjuna, as for the Buddha, the problem lies in our desire for abstraction, in our propensity to intellectually wander away from the concrete struggles of

everyday life, and in our unwillingness to help others. Hence, it is not that a "theory of liberation" is somehow logically fallacious, but that it "tends not to edification"--i.e., it leads us away from the practical, away from meditative reflection, and away form ethical concern by drawing our attention to more abstract concerns. The "emptiness" of the Four Noble Truths, of *nirvana*, and of dependent arising is the struggle to bring us back to the practical and concrete. It shifts the debate away from whether or not these terms accurately describe a certain world picture--to the more practical issue of how they function soteriologically in the lives of individuals.

Nagarjuna's concern for the practical makes his use of the Mahayana tool, *sunyata*, both simple and yet historically radical. While the majority of Indian philosophers debated over issues of causality, about whether the universe is fundamentally "one" or "many", about the correct means of cognition, and so on, Nagarjuna adopts a more simplistic and yet powerfully active role by demanding attention to the practical ways to cultivate an "enlightened" state for helping others. That we need a "theory" in order to cultivate this "enlightened" state is, for Nagarjuna, a backward, non-sensical, and "non-edifying" way to approach one of life's most direct concerns.

Nagarjuna's main point of attack is against the Abhidharma tradition and their way of taking Buddhist doctrine. His *Madhyamakakarika*, for example, begins with a chapter on causality, but then quickly moves through other major terms used by the Abhidharma thinkers, such as the elements of experience, the five aggregates, bondage, suffering, nirvana, and the Four Noble Truths. In each case, Nagarjuna tries to undercut the theoretical assumptions which underlie their analysis of the world by attacking the idea of the elementary units, or *dharmas*.

To show how he does this, we will examine a few important instances of Nagarjuna's critique. We will begin with his analysis of causality, and then to the way

Nagarjuna handles the "aggregates" of experience, such as "form," then to his analysis of suffering, bondage, and attachment, and, finally, to one of the most important chapters of the *Karikas*, the Four Noble Truths. After this, we should be in a good position to see the way Nagarjuna wants us to view Buddhist doctrine in general, that is, as a "skilful mean."

Nagarjuna's Buddha

If we remember from the first section of this thesis, the Buddha was confronted with at least sixty-two views regarding such things as, the nature of the universe, the status of karma, salvation, and ethical conduct--each view conflicting with the rest. The philosophical arena was saturated in what the Buddha felt was unnecessary quibbling, heated debates, and contradictory viewpoints, and instead of engaging in the type of metaphysical discourse that dominated the scene by taking sides with any one of the positions, or, conversely, by establishing an entirely new position over and above the others, he tried to reveal the underlying assumption on which all the supposedly contradictory theories rest: i.e., attachment. What each position shares, he said, was an insatiable desire for "truth," a desperate groping and longing for some principle or metaphysical theory that would establish once and for all the absolute validity of their own "view." Not only does this form of attachment easily lead to dogmatism, in which they claim, as the Buddha said, "This alone is Truth and everything else if false," but it creates the types of intellectual conflicts popular at the time.

To relieve such "blind attachment" the Buddha prescribed what he thought would be a helpful remedy--getting people to see that their views and metaphysical doctrines are not absolute--but "dependently originated," i.e., contingent upon the desires, feelings, dispositions, and mental states of those espousing the views. Another way of putting this is to say that what the Buddha tried to do was remind those who hold such metaphysical

views the *reasons* why such views were expressed in the first place, which was to help sentient beings caught in the realm of *samsaric* bondage. To say that "views" were "dependently originated" meant for the Buddha that they were dependent on the needs and dispositions of individuals, that they were grounded in the practical lives of specific people and not abstract metaphysical truths. As such, each view is provisionally "true," working, at least potentially, to help cure the ails of individuals. The different views of Brahman, Atman, Purusha, and Jiva, for example, can be seen as potentially useful in the struggle against a *samsara*, since they all express a life of spiritual freedom. The Buddha's insistence on the "dependently originated" nature of views was his way of getting people to loosen their grip on the absolutism surrounding their "views" by reminding them that what matters is not truth but salvation, not metaphysics but compassion.

It is important to remember that the "sixty-two views" the Buddha criticized were primarily "theories of liberation." The "views" of *sat*, (existence), and *asat*, (non-existence), for example, were held within the Hindu and Carvaka traditions respectively. *Sat* is not simply metaphysical view or a neutral observation about the nature of the world--but is a "path" or a "map" that one must understand in order to achieve liberation. Without understanding that within the human being there resides an eternal and permanent substratum (*Atman*), liberation from bondage is thought to be impossible. Likewise, without understanding *asat*, or the indestructibility of matter, then one would keep groping for something eternal and metaphysical, and hence suffer. The Buddha's attack against these "sixty-two views", then, is an attack not on metaphysics itself, or theory itself, or something having to do with the conceptualization inherent in any and all "views"--but is an attack on particular theories and views as they pertain to liberation.

Hence, when Nagarjuna says at the very end of the Karikas that the Buddha taught "the relinquishing of all views" he is referring to the Buddha's struggle against a certain

way of theorizing about enlightenment. The "62 views" are contingent upon "truth"--each reifying its own above the others, and claiming that this way, and only this way, is the path to liberation. When the Buddha exclaims the idea of "rafts," however, he is making a point about methodology. He is saying that the ability to help others, to relieve suffering, or attain liberation, is not something that comes about through a theoretical mode of apprehension. A "raft" is not a theory or view of liberation--it is a method for dealing with others. It says that one must look to the needs and dispositions of a particular person and see what type of "raft" they need to cross the turbulent stream of *samsara*. A "theory" or "view" assumes that only one "raft" will do the trick--that everyone can be ferried across simply by mouthing formulas independent of the contextual dispositions of various people. Hence, the Buddha did not offer a "view" of liberation--but taught instead the "relinquishing of views" for the purpose of helping others.

In the context of Indian thought, then, the Buddha's attack on "views" is quite novel. While other traditions taught the necessity of knowledge in relation to liberation, the Buddha disposed of "Truth," certainty, and fixed doctrines--and instead taught a plurality of approaches, strategies, and "skilful means" that corresponded to the direct karmic dispositions of those he faced. Even the "Four Noble Truths," said the Buddha, are nothing but "rafts" for crossing over the turbulent waters of existential pain, and not "for retaining." While each tradition debated over epistemological criteria, and over which view of the world was fundamentally "true," the Buddha tried to shift the level of discourse away from knowledge and truth to the practical issue of helping others.

The Buddha's attempt to shift the level of debate, however, did not go far. Not only did rival Hindu traditions continue "theorizing" about liberation--but, as we saw from the section on Abhidharma, the followers of the Buddha did the same. The Abhidharma thinkers thus debated amongst themselves over the correct nature of "dependent

origination," space, time, and nirvana, while simultaneously attacking the Jain, Carvaka, and orthodox Hindu positions. The level and pitch of metaphysical debates during this time far exceeded the mere "sixty-two" philosophical views that the Buddha confronted--which shows that his attempted shift was not totally successful.

Nevertheless, the spirit of the Buddha's message did not disappear completely. Amongst the rivalry and debate, Nagarjuna struggled to recuperate the Buddha's pedagogical style. Armed with the Mahayana notion of *upaya*, Nagarjuna criticized the underlying assumption shared by the Abhidharma and non-Buddhist positions alike--the idea that a "theory" of liberation is in any way necessary for helping others attain happiness.

He begins this project in the *Karikas* with an analysis of causality, one of the primary theoretical "maps" which the Abhidharma traditions used to justify their ontology. Nagarjuna's attack, as we will see, is to try and show the absurdity in taking the Buddha's teachings on "dependent arising" in a theoretical way.

Causality

None of the scholars we discussed in the preceding section differ over the precise manner in which Nagarjuna critiques the Abhidharma view of causation. That is, they all see his *reductios* working in basically the same way: to deconstruct the idea that experience is composed of *dharmas*. Thus, when it comes to causality, they all agree that Nagarjuna has demonstrated the absurdity in both causal views outlined in chapter 2; that, for example, the idea of something having a *svabhava*, or an independent nature, and still existing in dependent relationships is a contradiction; as is the view that things simply arise from "nowhere" and then vanish into "nowhere" without any connection to existing things.

The issue scholars disagree on is what Nagarjuna's critique amounts to. As we saw in the chapter 4, some think his deconstruction of causality is an attempt to establish a nihilistic world-view, and others think it leads to skepticism, conventionalism, or mysticism. Without repeating those arguments in detail, we should briefly review some of those interpretations.

In Chapter 1 of the *Karikas*, Nagarjuna states his position against causation in the following way.

> Neither from itself nor from another,
> Nor from both,
> Nor without a cause,
> Does anything whatever, anywhere arise.

The nihilist gives the most literal reading of this passage by saying that Nagarjuna is denying the possibility of anything existing in causal relationships--and, if there is no causality then there are no "things," and if there are no "things" then nothing exists at all. "Things" do not arise from themselves, from other things, from both at the same time, or from no causes whatsoever, which means for the nihilist that nothing originates, comes into being, or ceases. As Wood says,

> The Madhyamikas themselves appear to have believed that it is simply *false* that things originate. The ultimate truth--and therefore the only truth--is that things do not originate at all, i.e., they are completely void (sunya) and non-existent (asat)...there are no plants, electrons, dharmas etc. that arise in a real causal process. And this doctrine--at least when interpreted very strictly, as it was in the Madhyamika--is the *nihilist* position.[8]

The mystical reading agrees with the nihilist that Nagarjuna reveals the absurdity in every possible view regarding causality, but disagrees with the nihilist's conclusion. For the mystic, Nagarjuna's argument against causality reveals an inherent contradiction in

conceptual thinking; that is, it brings out the dichotomies between "things" and causal relations such that both are seen to be, as Candrakirti says, *prapanca*, the "duality of name and what is named." All of the four causal views that Nagarjuna refers to are attempts to explain the world conceptually, the mystic holds, and by denying all of them collectively Nagarjuna denies the ability to grasp the world through rational thought patterns.

> The insuperable difficulties which confront all these attempts condemn the relation as mere appearance. Like origination, destruction is neither self-caused nor brought about by others. The conclusion that is forced on us is that causation is inexpressible, like the illusory appearance. "Origination, existence and destruction" says Nagarjuna, "are of the nature of maya, dreams or fairy castle."[9]

Underlying this "illusion," however, is a deeper "Truth" for the mystic, inaccessible to rational or conceptual thought, but nevertheless attainable through *prajna*, a direct, unmediated insight into the nature of reality.

Between the nihilist and mystic is the conventionalist reading of causality. Nagarjuna's rejection of causality, the conventionalist holds, is simply the rejection of the attempt to ground the world on an ontological basis. In asserting its "emptiness," the conventionalist sees Nagarjuna as denying causal essences, substances, and "hidden powers" to explain experience. But rather than falling into the extreme of nihilism which undercuts all explanations regarding causality, the conventionalist sees Nagarjuna as establishing the validity of our everyday discourse to explain the world. This, they say, is the Middle Path regarding causality.

> That midpoint is achieved by taking conventions as the foundation of ontology, hence rejecting the very enterprise of a philosophical search for the ontological foundations of convention. . .To assert the emptiness of causation is to accept the utility of our causal discourse and explanatory practice, but to resist the temptation to se these as grounded in reference to causal powers or as demanding such grounding. Dependent origination simply is the explicability and coherence of the universe. Its emptiness is the fact that there is no more to it than that.[10]

The main problem with these views, however, is that they tend to complicate what I think is a rather simple position. Instead of saying anything that we might consider philosophically interesting, at least traditionally so, I think Nagarjuna is more in line with the Buddha's position toward all problems of this kind--to see them as a non-issue. In other words, perhaps Nagarjuna is not saying anything about causality except for the fact that it is not a relevant issue when it comes soteriological or ethical concerns. The Abhidharma tradition based its philosophy on the assumption that knowledge of causation is paramount for liberation, and when Nagarjuna asserts its "emptiness" he is only saying that the project of defining its nature, as well as the idea that we must know causation to be liberated, are both absurd.

Understanding this point means seeing Nagarjuna's thought as deeply embedded within that *upayic* tradition that has been explained throughout this thesis. One of the main points that has been emphasized in this regard is that a "theory of liberation" is unnecessary to help sentient beings. That one needs to *know* the nature of *dharmas*, how they arise and cease, interconnect, and condition everyday experience is a sign that one has taken the teaching of "dependent arising" in a non-*upayic* way, as a "truth" that needs to be discovered. In this sense, Nagarjuna is only trying to mirror a similar position taken by the Buddha. If we remember form Chapter 1, the Buddha was asked to comment on certain speculative questions popular in India during his time, such as whether the world is eternal or not, whether the soul is identical to the body or different from it, or whether "Tathagata" continues after death. One of his disciples was concerned that the Buddha had not answered these questions, and, thinking that his salvation depended on getting these questions straight, decided to leave the Buddha if they were not answered. The Buddha's

response was direct and unambiguous: such questions have nothing to do with leading a religious life or experiencing *nirvana*.

> The religious life, Malunkyaputta, does not depend on the view that the world is eternal; nor does the religious life, Malunkyaputta, depend on the dogma that the world is not eternal. Whether the view obtain, Malunkyaputta, that the world is eternal, or that the world is not eternal, there still remain birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair...Why, Malunkyaputta, have I not explained this? Because, Malunkyaputta, this profits not, nor has it to do with the fundamentals of religion, nor tends to aversion, absence of passion, cessation, quiescence, supreme wisdom, and Nirvana; therefore, have I not explained it?[11]

Nagarjuna is taking a similar position when it comes to causality. This does not mean that all discourse surrounding causality is absolutely irrelevant. If we take the case of the Buddha, we will remember from Chapter 1 that he too taught doctrines which can easily be classified as "metaphysical"--doctrines which at times are not so different from the those which he refused to answer above. The difference, however, is that the Buddha was not concerned about the truth value of such claims because his intent was soteriological, not descriptive. The Buddha's disciple in the above passage missed this point: he thinks that his salvation depends on the whether these doctrines are true. But the Buddha does not play this game. His goal is to help sentient beings, and he understands that the ability to do so is not dependent on speculating over the truth value of such claims.

The Nikaya scholars are akin to the Buddha's disciple above; they assume that the religious life depends on answering the pressing metaphysical dilemma of how *dharmas* arise and cease through the laws of "dependent arising." It's not just that they adopt a philosophical "realism" in their explanation of causation, as some scholars note, but that its "truth" is tantamount for salvation, and its validity a necessary prerequisite for proper meditative practice. For them, lack of knowledge signifies bondage. When Nagarjuna says that causality is "empty," however, he is pointing out a flaw in this way of thinking. For

him, the "truth" of a *dharmic* world view is irrelevant when it comes to transforming a life rooted in attachment.

If the Nikaya scholars had stuck to explaining the *abhidharma* texts as basic meditative devices, as " skilful means," then much of the Mahayana critique would never have come about. They did not take this approach, however, which explains such heated debates over the nature of cause and effect relations, as well as the sectarian divisions that followed upon the heels of these debates. Following the lead of the Mahayana sutras, Nagarjuna is simply reminding these scholars about the *upayic* nature of all Buddhist doctrine: dependent arising, emptiness, *anatman*, and nirvana are not used propositionally, they do not point to or describe objective properties in the world. They are simply *upayas* used for the purpose of uprooting attachment.

The point of Nagarjuna's deconstruction of causality, then, is not to describe an ineffable beyond, a state of nihilism, or the conventional nature of phenomena, but to show the absurdity in thinking that a theory of causation is necessary for liberation. The "emptiness" of causality amounts to nothing more than that: it is "empty" of an essence, a substance, or some definable "inherent nature." And the philosophical discourse that surrounds causality, therefore, which includes not just the Abhidharma but about every major philosophical tradition at the time, tends not toward edification, i.e., misses the mark.

In the *Karikas*, Nagarjuna moves from an analysis of causality to an analysis of the other major terms and categories that occupied the Abhidharma thinkers, such as the aggregates, suffering, bondage, and attachment. His reason for choosing these topics is that they are vital to the Abhidharma project. One must have knowledge of the nature of bondage, for example, to overcome it, or one must know the *dharmic* nature of nirvana in order to experience nirvana. As usual, Nagarjuna analyzes each subject and comes to the

same conclusion: they are all "empty" of substance. In saying this, however, we must be careful not to think that he is abolishing Buddhist doctrine. Rather, asserting their "emptiness" means for Nagarjuna that the theoretical basis underlying the Abhidharma explanation of these terms is absurd. In asserting their "emptiness," Nagarjuna attacks the project of coming up with a definitive explanation of Buddhist doctrine--hence undermining the common view that liberation entails a theoretical understanding of the world.

The Five Aggregates

In Chapter 4 of the *Karikas* Nagarjuna examines the five aggregates which are considered the basic categories of personal experience. Beginning with the first aggregate, form (*rupa*), Nagarjuna applies his *reductios* against the idea that either form or the cause of form must exist in a substantial way. The dialectical method used by Nagarjuna is performed just as it was in his analysis of causality, and begins with the following verses:

> Apart from the cause of form,
> Form cannot be conceived.
> Apart from form,
> The cause of form is not seen.
>
> If apart from the cause of form, there were form,
> Form would be without cause.
> But nowhere is there an effect
> Without a cause
>
> If apart from form
> There were a cause of form,
> It would be a cause without an effect.
> But there are no causes without effects.
>
> When form exists,
> A cause of the arising of form is not tenable.
> When form is non-existent,
> A cause of the arising of form is not tenable.
>
> Form itself without a cause
> Is not possible or tenable.

Therefore, think about form, but
Do not construct theories about form.

The assertion that the effect and cause are similar
Is not acceptable.
The assertion that they are not similar
Is also not acceptable.[12]

Nagarjuna is arguing in these six verses against the claim that the *rupa* aggregate exists in a substantial or essential manner, or that it has a definable characteristic, a *svabhava*, that identifies it as a *dharma*. If we keep in mind the Abhidharma view that a *dharma's* "self nature" is wound up with an explanation of causality, we will understand what Nagarjuna is up to in these passages. The two main Abhidharma analysis rested on defining a *dharma* as either different from or identical to its causal properties, and what Nagarjuna is trying to show is how both views lead to absurd conclusions.

If, as the Sautrantikas declare, an entity is fundamentally different from its cause, which is implied in their theory of "moments," then we should be able to speak of cause and effect as two separate things. On the other hand, if, as the Sarvastivadin say, a *dharma* is identical to its causal relations then we should make no distinctions between a cause and effect since they are numerically the same. What Nagarjuna says about both positions is contained in the above verses. It makes no sense, he says, to separate the aggregate *rupa* from its cause because we then have the conclusion that *rupa* can exist without any causal relations whatsoever, i.e., that cause and effect are two separate "things." This means that an effect can exist without a cause, and that a cause can exist without an effect. But this conclusion is absurd, says Nagarjuna, since nowhere do find causes without effects, or effects without causes. The two terms stand in a relation, thus making it a contradiction to assert their independence. This is the gist of the first three verses.

In the forth verse, Nagarjuna continues his critique by saying that if *rupa* has an identifiable essence, something that could be classified as *svabhava*, then it makes no sense

to speak of something else "causing" it to arise since it already exists as an independent entity. Similarly, a non-existent cause for *rupa* is logically incoherent, since if it is non-existent than it makes no sense to claim that it could cause other things to arise.

The Sarvastivadin position was already shown in the first chapter of the *Karikas* to lead to a similar conclusion, and is hence disregarded quickly in the above passages. If cause and effect are identical--then we have the similar conceptual problem as we did with the Sautantrika view, making it impossible to speak coherently about cause and effect relations. If they are identical, then there is no causality, since causality presupposes at least some amount of change from one thing to another thing.

The conclusion, as Nagarjuna asserts in verse six, is that an essential effect is neither different from or similar to an essential cause, since the whole idea of something having an essence, either a "self nature" or an "other nature," is absurd.

> The assertion that the effect and cause are similar
> Is not acceptable.
> The assertion that they are not similar
> Is also not acceptable.

The above passages point in the same direction as do all other chapters in the *Karikas*: to the "emptiness" of "inherent nature." Whenever an analysis is made in terms of substance--be it causality, the aggregates, the self, suffering, or nirvana--Nagarjuna utilizes the same dialectical move by attacking the view that these terms have substantial existence--they are "empty."

As we have seen however, Nagarjuna scholars take the idea of "emptiness" to mean different things. Murti would take the above passages as pointing to an ineffable realm, while Wood would see them as the attempt to establish the ultimate non-existence of the

aggregates. Garfield notes that these passages about the "emptiness" of the aggregates are part of Nagarjuna's attempt to reveal the conventional nature of phenomena:

> And this is meant to have been demonstrated by the argument in this chapter in the following way: Once we have shown something to be empty of inherent existence, we have ipso facto, shown it to be dependently arisen and merely conventionally real."[13]

The problem with these types of interpretations is that whether we see the above passages as an attempt to establish an ineffable truth, a nihilism, or the possibility of a conventional realm, we are still thinking of Nagarjuna's project in terms of establishing a definite philosophical position. That is, we turn him into a philosopher.

That Nagarjuna was not interested in establishing any philosophical position in regards the aggregates is clearly stated in the last two lines of the fifth verse, where he says,

> Therefore, think about form, but
> Do not construct theories about form.

The conclusion Nagarjuna derives from his analysis of "form" is not a new philosophical position over and above the Sarvastivadin and Sautantrika positions. He has just shown that their theories about "form" are incoherent, and instead of proposing a new theory, he says to do away with theories; instead of coming up with a new philosophical "truth" about the nature of form, be it mystical, nihilistic, or conventional, he tries to undercut the desire to theorize, a desire which seeks to know form, to establish it, to ground it in a metaphysical way. We can "think about form," he says, which means to utilize it, meditate on it, harness it as a "skilful means," but to theorize about it misses the mark. This conclusion is then extended to all the other aggregates as well.

Feelings, discrimination and dispositions
and consciousness and all such things
Should be thought of
In the same way as material form.

The majority of arguments in the *Karikas* proceed along these lines. The idea of *svabhava*, essence, substance, or inherent nature is attacked for being inconsistent, which makes the Abhidharma insistence on needing to know the nature of reality, its *svabhava*, utterly foolish. From an analysis of causality and the aggregates, Nagarjuna moves on to the other major factors in Abhidharma analysis of experience, performing the same task in each case: deconstructing the view of *svabhava* without putting in its place another theoretical map of the world.

Suffering, Attachment, and Bondage

In the chapter, "Examination of Suffering," Nagarjuna argues against the view that suffering can be explained in an essentialistic way. This is an important chapter of the *Karikas*, if only because it goes against the prevailing view in Indian philosophy that suffering needs to be an object of knowledge, i.e., that we need to know exactly what suffering is, how it arises, and what makes it disappear in order to achieve liberation. Nagarjuna begins by laying out four popular theories on how suffering arises.

Some say suffering is self-produced,
Or produced from another or from both.
Or that it arises without a cause.
It is not the kind of thing to be produced.[14]

Nagarjuna ends the verse by stating the conclusion: suffering is not the kind of thing that can be explained by appealing to some form of inherent production. He goes on

to explain that suffering is not self-produced because that would entail speaking of production in isolation from causal conditions, i.e., production without any real cause and effect. It cannot come from something wholly other because the idea of essential difference precludes the necessary relationship that must adhere between conditioned things. The final two alternatives are rejected for leading to similar absurd conclusions: to say that suffering is both self-produced and other-produced is a basic contradiction, and saying that it arises without any cause whatsoever implies that things can arise from nowhere--which make no sense. Nagarjuna ends the chapter with the following verse,

> Not only does suffering not exist
> In any of the fourfold ways:
> No external entity exists
> In any of the fourfold ways.[15]

It is important to note that nowhere in this chapter does Nagarjuna say what suffering is in itself. He offers no new theory on how it comes about, what its nature consists in, or in what way we must gain knowledge of it in order to achieve liberation. His goal is simply to refute those theories which rely on an essentialistic understanding of the world. Not only does suffering lack an essence--but it is absurd to speak of "external entities" as existing in this way as well. By attacking the idea that suffering has an essence, he tries to undermine the view that suffering must be an object of knowledge before one can achieve liberation, i.e., that one must "know" suffering in order to overcome suffering.

Nagarjuna's critique of an "essence" to suffering is applied to the cause of suffering as well. The Indian tradition generally held the view that to know suffering entails knowing the cause of suffering. Hence, if one can gain knowledge into the exact nature of suffering, then one will know what caused it, and in knowing what caused it one will be able to stop it. To know the causes of suffering is the prime step in getting out of *samsara*

since liberation is, at the very least, a state, realm, or experience in which there is no suffering. Hence, one must first know what suffering is, and what causes it, before one can know how to escape it.

On this point, all the major Indian traditions agree: suffering, *samsara*, bondage, and dis-ease is caused by attachment. Whether it is attachment to the fruits of action, attachment to the *gunas*, *Prakriti*, an empirical "self," friends, relatives, or material things, there is complete agreement that the cause of suffering lies in our attachments. Nagarjuna also shares the view that suffering is linked to attachment, but ascribes no significance to the idea that attachment needs to be an object of knowledge. Just as causality, *rupa*, and suffering are "empty"--then so too is attachment, without essence, substance, or inherent nature. Therefore, the idea that there is something there to know is, for Nagarjuna, misguided.

In the "Examination of Bondage" chapter of the *Karikas*, for example, Nagarjuna argues against the idea that the essence of *samsara* can be located in the act of "grasping." The gist of the argument is that if grasping (attachment) has an inherent nature, an essence, then we should be able to identify the subject of attachment, the "grasper"--i.e., if there is "grasping" then there must be someone or something, a subject, that does the grasping. But since, on Nagarjuna's view, no inherently existing subject can be found, then the idea of an essential "grasping" is likewise not possible.

> If grasping were bondage,
> Then the one who is grasping would not be bound.
> But one who is not grasping is not bound.
> In what circumstances will one be bound?
>
> If prior to binding
> There is a bound one,
> There would be bondage, but there isn't.
> The rest has been explained by the gone, the not-gone, and the goer.[16]

What Nagarjuna does here is to drive a wedge between bondage and the person bound. If bondage does have an essence, then, like all essences, it must exist as an independent phenomena, separate from and prior to the person becoming bound. Likewise, if a person has an essence, a *svabhava*, then it too must be separate from the act of grasping that is identified as bondage. The point Nagarjuna makes in the above passage, however, is that such a dualism is untenable. If the person "grasping" has an inherent nature independent from that act, then it is obviously not bound--and if it is not bound, then the whole idea of needing to get out of bondage makes no sense. The separation between the subject which grasps, the act of grasping, and the phenomena of being bound, which is needed to identify any of these things as existing inherently, is a separation that excludes the necessary relationship that must adhere between these activities. It is like severing the relation between motion and moving, which, as Nagarjuna explains in chapter II of the *Karikas*, leads to the absurd conclusion that there is no movement.

The reification of suffering, attachment, and bondage that Nagarjuna criticizes here goes hand in hand with a reification of non-attachment, or *nirvana*, as well. When *samsara* is essentialized into a fixed principle with its own "inherent nature"--then *nirvana* is separated off, distinguished from all other things, and reified into realm of independence. Such a radical separation severs any possible relationship between being bound and achieving liberation, and leads to the conclusion that whatever is bound must necessarily remain bound, and whatever is released must stay released. As Nagarjuna puts it,

> Whoever is bound is not released.
> Whoever is not bound does not get released.[17]

This is an unacceptable conclusion for a Buddhist, or any other Indian tradition that seeks to liberate sentient beings, and is why Nagarjuna ends the chapter with the following question:

> When you can't bring about nirvana,
> Nor the purification of cyclic existence,
> What is cyclic existence,
> And what is the nirvana you examine?[18]

The point Nagarjuna makes here is that since it is impossible to be liberated when one treats samsara and *nirvana* as substantially existent, then the problem lies in the way these terms are being conceptualized. To think of grasping, bondage, suffering, and liberation as objects of knowledge is to treat them as having identifiable essences, as fixed and independent entities. But treating them in this way undermines the reasons why we use these terms; that is, if *nirvana* and *samsara* are independent entities then there can be no connection between the two, and hence that which is bound can never hope to attain liberation.

In moving from causality, the aggregates, and the elements of existence to suffering, attachment, *samsara* and *nirvana*, Nagarjuna covers virtually every sphere of Buddhist doctrine. In each case he undermines the idea of *svabhava*--thus undermining the assumption that these terms, categories, and experiences are things to be known. If there is no essence to causality, to suffering, to attachment or to *nirvana*, then they are, as Nagarjuna says, "empty" of inherent nature. And if they are "empty"--then the assumption that one must gain knowledge of their nature, to know them as stepping stones to liberation, is unwarranted. In attacking *svabhava*, Nagarjuna attacks a metaphysics of liberation; i.e., attacks the commonly held view that one must know the what the world is

like, what suffering is, how it is causally related to attachment, and how to escape it. They are all "empty" and there is hence nothing substantially there to know.

The Four Noble Truths

What Nagarjuna wants us to take away from his critique of *svabhava* is a certain way of looking at Buddhist philosophy. He wants us to see that The Four Noble Truths taught by the Buddha are not propositions about the nature of reality; they do not depict a metaphysical picture about the world or describe an ontological substratum. He has tried to show us that the attempt to define *pratityasamutpada*, for example, ends in contradiction, that the idea of causality having an essence is absurd, and that it is counterproductive to speak of suffering, attachment, and samsara as objects of knowledge. The "emptiness" of the Four Noble Truths is thus laid out by Nagarjuna as the only valid way of taking the Buddha's message, and what this means is that they are not established propositionally.

This "emptiness" of the Four Noble Truths is liable to misunderstanding, however, and is why Nagarjuna devotes an entire chapter to it in the *Karikas*. In the "Examination of the Four Noble Truths," he begins by stating the position of an opponent who has taken the idea of "emptiness" to entail a nihilistic stance in regards Buddhist doctrine. The chapter is important, since we get a clear idea of how Nagarjuna wants us to think of "emptiness." The opponent begins by saying the following,

> If all of this is empty,
> Neither arising nor ceasing,
> Then for you, it follows that
> The Four Noble Truths do not exist.
>
> If the Four Noble Truths do not exist,
> Then knowledge, abandonment,
> Meditation and manifestation
> Will be completely impossible.

If these things do not exist,
The four fruits will not arise.
Without the four fruits, there will be no attainers of the fruits.
Nor will there be the faithful.

If so, the spiritual community will not exist.
Nor will the eight kinds of person.
If the Four Noble Truths do not exist,
There will be no true Dharma.

If there is no doctrine and spiritual community,
How can there be a Buddha?
If emptiness is conceived in this way,
The three jewels are contradicted.

This is the type of response that comes from someone (like an Abhidharma thinker) who thinks Buddhist doctrine describes an essential truth about the world, and who therefore sees its "emptiness"--its lack of a solid “truth”--as signifying something meaningless. If "emptiness" takes away the "truth" in Buddhism, says Nagarjuna's opponent, if it deconstructs the attempt to gain knowledge of *pratityasamutpada* and *nirvana* because these terms don't depict a ontologically correct world, then the entire Buddhist life is vacuous and contradictory.

Nagarjuna responds to this claim by telling the opponent that he has completely misunderstood the meaning of "emptiness."

We say that this understanding of yours
Of emptiness and purpose of emptiness
And of the significance of emptiness is incorrect.
As a consequence you are harmed by it.[19]

Because the opponent has taken "emptiness" to signify the non-existence of the Four Noble Truths, he is "harmed by it"--in other words, he sees “emptiness” as destructive. But his reason for thinking that "emptiness" is destructive is because he thinks

the Four Noble Truths are immutible, ultimate truths: he thinks that impermanence, *anatman*, and dependent arising, for example, describe some deep ontological truth, and for these to be "empty" entails for the Abhidharmist that they are meaningless. Another way of saying this is that his view of liberation is wound up with a "theoretical" understanding of the Dharma, a view which says one must know "truth" for salvation, and for Nagarjuna to undercut this "truth" means that salvation is impossible.

The way Nagarjuna responds to this assumption is to reverse the tables and say that it is not "emptiness" that destroys the Four Noble Truths--but the very idea of things having *svabhava*.

> If you perceive the existence of all things
> In terms of *svabhava*,
> Then this perception of all things
> Will be without the perception of causes and conditions.
>
> Effects and causes
> And agent and action
> And conditions and arising and ceasing
> And effects will be rendered impossible.[20]

Nagarjuna goes on to say that the reason essences militate against causal conditions, arising, ceasing, agency, and so forth, is because the idea of essence entails independence, and if things are by nature independent then it is impossible for them to interact causally. If this is true then there is no "dependent arising," and without "dependent arising" it is impossible to make sense of the ability to cultivate a virtuous life. In other words, without the process of change then the whole idea of cultivating the "fruits" of a Buddhist life is rendered nonsensical. Thus, Nagarjuna's response is to say that things (*dharmas*) must be "empty" of essence if we are to make any sense of the Four Noble Truths.

> If dependent arising is denied,
> Emptiness itself is rejected.

This would contradict
All of the worldly conventions.

If emptiness is rejected,
No action will be appropriate.
There would be action which did not begin,
And there would be agent without action.

If there is *svabhava*, the whole world
Will be unarising, unceasing,
And static. The entire phenomenal world
Would be immutable.

If it (the world) were not empty,
Then action would be without profit.
The act of ending suffering and
Abandoning misery and defilement would not exist.[21]

Nagarjuna has thus shifted the debate. Whereas the Abhidharma thinker begins with the assumption that the Four Noble Truths are propositions signifying something metaphysically truthful about the world, which then leads him to say that we must "know" these truths if we want to attain liberation, Nagarjuna undercuts the metaphysics, and in so doing lets fall to the ground the debate as to whether or not the Four Noble Truths signify a "truth" about experience.

If one takes the Four Noble Truths as descriptive of an underlying reality composed of identifiable essences, then according to Nagarjuna one is faced with unresolvable contradictions: it becomes impossible to make sense of impermanence, causality, suffering, bondage, and liberation. But Nagarjuna is unwilling to go this far. His "faith" in the Dharma as a soteriogical device committs him to seeing the Four Noble Truths as relevant and sensible, and so the Dharma must lack the *svabhavic* interpretation which the Abhidharma philosophers give it.

Summary

What Nagarjuna is struggling against in the above passages is the attempt to construct a philosophical "theory" out of Buddhist doctrine. "Emptiness," he said, is the "unsurpassed medicine for those consumed by the fever of *svabhava*.," [22] and *svabhava* here refers to the specific theoretical "map" which the Abhidharma thinkers attributed to Buddhism. In asserting its "emptiness" Nagarjuna is trying to loosen their grip on the Dharma as pointing to an underlying ontology composed of elementary particles (*dharmas*) and definable substances (*svabhava*). The "medicine" of *sunyata*, in this context, is a series of *reductio* arguments applied to the idea of independent "things," and to be cured of this fever means that one is no longer attached to this particular "theory" of Buddhism.

The final verse of the *Karikas*, Nagarjuna extends this conclusion to include any attempt to construct a "theory of liberation" by saying that it was just this type of thinking which the Buddha sought to "cure."

> I prostrate to Gautama
> Who through compassion
> Taught the true doctrine,
> Which leads to the relinquishing of all views.[23]

Some scholars see this final verse as Nagarjuna's attack on all "theories," views, or philosophical projects. As we have seen, however, *drsti*, or "views" is not used by the Buddha in such an abstract, "theoretical" way, but refers to those who think one needs a correct analysis of the world in order to achieve liberation. *Drsti*, in this context, is not any view regarding the "nature" of the universe, the mind, causality, or experience; but a certain perspective toward liberation. It assumes that to help others one needs to understand a

"truth" about the world. This approach, as we have seen, is criticized by the Buddha for its backwardness because it forces one to adopt a detached perspective while helping others—and it is precisely this detached perspective which the Buddha tried to cure. Thus, to relinquish "views" means to abandon that perspective which keeps one from seeing the concrete suffering of individuals: it means to look with the "Buddha-eye" of compassion into the different dispositions, needs, and karmic-formations of people, rather than seeing them from a theoretical distance. In aligning himself with the Buddha on this point, Nagarjuna ends the *Karikas* by telling us that "emptiness" is a medicinal tool, an *upaya*, that helps cure this "fever."

To accept "emptiness" as a panacea, however, is to miss the entire point of Buddhism. As Nagarjuna says in Chapter 13 of the *Karikas*, "empiness" is a tool used in the struggle to cure a "theoretical" understanding of liberation (*drsti*), but if one then takes "emptiness" as a new theory or another philosophical "view," than one's "sickness" is indeed profound.

> The victorious ones have said
> That empiness is the relinquishing of all views.
> For whomever emptiness is a view,
> That one will accomplish nothing.[24]

NOTES

[1] *Taittiriya Upanishad*, Radhakrishnan and Moore, trans., *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, (Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 57.

[2] *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*, Radhakrishnan and Moore, trans., *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, (Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 82.

[3] *Chandogya Upanishad*, Radhakrishnan and Moore, trans., *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, (Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 69.

[4] *Mundaka Upanishad*, Radhakrishnan and Moore, trans., *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, (Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 55.

[5] *Kena Upanishad*, Radhakrishnan and Moore, trans., *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, (Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 50.

[6] P. T. Raju, *Structural Depths of Indian Thought*, (State University of New York Press, 1985), p. 381.

[7] S. Radhakrishnan, *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, (Princeton University Press, 1973), p. xxiii-xxiv.

[8] Ibid., p. 226.

[9] Murti, (1955), p. 177.

[10] Garfield, (1995). p. 122.

[11] *Majjhima-nikaya*, Sutta 63, Lucian Stryk, ed., *World of the Buddha*, (Grove Press, New York, 1968), p. 148-149.

[12] Nagarjuna, *Madhyamakakarika*, Ch IV, Jay Garfield, trans., *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 12.

[13] Jay Garfield, *The fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 147.

[14] Nagarjuna, *Madhyamakakarika*, Ch IV, Jay Garfield, trans., *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 33.

[15] Ibid., p. 34.

[16] Nagarjuna, *Madhyamakakarika*, Ch IV, Jay Garfield, trans., *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 41-42.

[17] Ibid., p. 41-42.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., Ch XXIV, p. 68.

[20] Ibid., p.69. Garfield uses "essence" in place of *svabhava* in the above passages, though I prefer to leave it in the original since the term *svabhava* captures more fully the the Abhidharmic analysis of Buddhism.

[21] Ibid., p. 72

[22] Nagarjuna, *Acintyastava*, Chr. Lindtner, trans., *Master of Wisdom*, (Dharma Publishing, 1986), p. 29.

[23] Ibid., p. 83.

[24] Ibid., p. 36.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

In concluding this thesis, I should say something about where my project stands in relation to the tradition of Buddhist scholars I have criticized. Having devoted an entire thesis to the idea of "skilful means," it now needs to be asked how my project escapes the non-*upayic* approach to Buddhism I have criticized, and, more importantly, how the project relates to Buddhist practice generally. It should be obvious that I have a deep admiration for Buddhism, and that the idea of "skilful means" is one I find both philosophically and personally appealing. Nevertheless, if this thesis has succeeded in expressing what is most significant about the doctrine of "skilful means," then the most obvious question one should ask is how my project embodies that idea. I want to answer this question by briefly restating the problem of the thesis, and to then ask whether my approach avoids that problem--or continues it.

Generally, this thesis was addressed to those who explain Buddhism from a Western philosophical perspective. It was not about Buddhist practice or meditation, and nor was it an explication of Buddhist doctrine. Rather, it sought to clarify the prejudices involved in those who try to make Buddhism philosophically digestible for a Western audience. By focusing on "skilful means" I tried to show that Buddhism is generally unconcerned with "philosophy" by arguing that Buddhist teachings are not ontologically or epistemologically based, and that the attempt to justify its teachings in this way misses the point of Buddhism. I am not claiming that "emptiness," "dependent arising," "non-self," and "*nirvana*" are incapable of being made philosophically interesting, or that it is somehow

wrong to apply Buddhist ideas to other philosophical problems; rather, the problem I tried to confront is a tendency to frame Buddhist thought as though it were addressing the same types of problems that Western philosophers have traditionally found interesting.

This approach is problematic because, traditionally speaking, Buddhism is generally unconcerned with theoretical or doctrinal issues. There has never been an official, "orthodox" creed in Buddhism, no established principles that dictate the way everyone should think, and no ideological struggle to impose a standard of belief on all Buddhists. In fact, all the major rivalries and sectarian schisms that took place in Buddhist history rarely occurred because of philosophical differences. Whatever rifts occurred in Buddhist history happened not because rival "schools" held different beliefs about Buddhist doctrine or the nature of reality, but occurred over issues surrounding monastic discipline and practice. As Paul Williams notes,

> Schools and traditions might differ on doctrinal matters, and of course doctrinal differences might arise after schism has occurred, which would then differentiate further the groups thus formed. Nevertheless, differences of doctrine as such are a personal matter. In theory a monastery could happily contain monks holding quite different doctrines so long as they *behaved* in the same way--crucially, so long as they adhered to the same monastic code.[1]

That Buddhism has an incredible diversity of philosophical beliefs, world-views, and religious doctrines is obvious to anyone who studies Buddhism, but it would be a mistake to reduce Buddhism to a single world-view, or to think that we can explain Buddhism in terms of "essential" principles or "core" beliefs. Traditionally, Buddhism is far more concerned with *how* one practices, meditates, and relates to others than it is with philosophical or religious beliefs. To take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, which is the traditional way one becomes a Buddhist, cannot be explained solely in terms of adopting a certain world-view, a philosophy, or a belief about the nature of existence, because "taking refuge" is more about basic Buddhist practices which, at the

very least, includes refraining from killing, lying, stealing, sexual misconduct, and alcohol. To think of Buddhism solely in terms of "belief" assumes that one can abstract the ideas, doctrines, and philosophical notions from their practical role in meditation and still have an "essential" Buddhism.

However, whether one meditates on "emptiness" or prays to the Buddha as God, believes in a "self" or "non-self," thinks that consciousness is eternally pure and substance-like or conditioned and impermanent, is relatively unimportant in comparison to the practices which Buddhism has traditionally promoted. That monks with diametrically opposing beliefs can live in the same monastery as long as they practice the same monastic disciplines, that Buddhist teachers sometimes teach "contradictory" views depending on their pupils, and that the majority of Buddhist texts, sutras, scriptures, and commentaries are devoted not to "theory" but to meditation techniques clearly shows that orthodoxy, or "correct belief" is not the defining issue in Buddhist thought. Whether one has a "correct" belief regarding causality, God, the "self" or impermanence is irrelevant as long as one abides by the Buddhist precepts and attempts to cultivate a sense of compassion and mindfulness. The practice of *vipassana* meditation which perhaps more than anything else distinguishes Buddhist praxis does not take place on an epistemic level: one does not need to know the "truth" of a Buddhist world-view before engaging in meditation, and, hence, to practice one of the most significant features in Buddhism.

Underlying the diversity of Buddhist practices is the idea of "skilful means," which is what allows the Buddhas and bodhisattvas to use any number of meditational devices, yogic techniques, strategies, and "philosophical" doctrines to connect with their audience. Because Buddhist teachings are given within a certain rhetorical context, it would be a mistake to determine their "truth" apart from their practical application. The teachings are meant to be effective, they are given to a particular audience and at the appropriate time, and

to "theorize" about their metaphysical, ontological, or epistemological status apart from this role takes us away from a key element in Buddhist practice.

The prejudice of those I have criticized in this thesis has to do with judging the value of Buddhism apart from this *upayic* role. Neglecting the actual practices of a Buddhist life, they focus on doctrinal aspects such as "emptiness," "non-self," "dependent arising," and the "two truths," explaining these terms in such as to give them philosophical merit apart from how they function rhetorically. Nagarjuna's "emptiness of emptiness," for example, is generally seen as philosophical move: it deconstructs epistemological realism, essentialism, metaphysics, causality, and a referential view of language. It tells us something about how the mind posits "hidden" essences and "secret powers," how language carves the world into subject/object dualities, or how consciousness constructs an illusory world of "things" interacting "in" space and time. But it is precisely this "philosophical" move that is rejected by the doctrine of *upaya* because it forces us to think of Buddhist teachings on a "theoretical" level--independently of a rhetorical and practical context.

Even more problematic is that many of the scholars I criticize say that they are giving an *upayic* account of Buddhism. That is, they see their interpretations, and hence, their own texts, as showing us the way to enlightenment. The majority of Madhyamika scholars I discussed in Chapters V and VI, for example, tell us that Nagarjuna's dialectical critique of *svabhava* is geared not only to "philosophical" concerns--but that liberation depends on understanding exactly what Nagarjuna is doing. According to Murti, for example,

> The dialectic, then, as the Sunyata of drstis, is the negation of standpoints, which are the initial negation of the real that is essentially indeterminate. Correctly understood, Sunyata is not annihilation, but the negation of negation; it is the conscious correction of an initial unconscious falsification of the real.[2]

Murti not only sees Nagarjuna as diagnosing a fundamental problem in human existence, but also thinks that his dialectical method will "cure" us. The problem is basically philosophical in nature, and consists in "covering" the Real with a conceptual thought, which, according to Murti, amounts to an unconscious negation of "Truth." Thus, if we could reverse this process (to negate the negation), then we would experience liberation. What is significant is that Murti sees himself as remaining faithful to an *upayic* account of Buddhism: "emptiness" is the "means" for correcting a "falsification of the real."

Frederick Streng also reads Nagarjuna in an *upayic* way. "Emptiness," as he says, is a "means for quelling the pain found in existential 'becoming' which results from longing after an eternal undisturbed entity."[3] Whereas Murti tells us that Nagarjuna's dialectic will help us achieve liberation by "demolishing" what he calls "the conflict in reason," Streng tells us that Nagarjuna's dialectic attacks a referential view of language which posits objective "things" in the world. Thus, by understanding what he calls a "relational norm of meaning," i.e., that words are meaningful only in relationship to other words and not in reference to an objective reality, we will be "cured" of the longing for an "eternal undisturbed entity." Huntington expresses a similar view when he says the following:

> Recognition of the strictly contextual or pragmatic significance of the thoughts and objects that populate our mental and material world renders meaningless any search for a transcendental ground behind these phenomena...What is immediately given in everyday experience is indeed all that there is, for the inherently interdependent nature of the components of this experience *is* the truth of the highest meaning: both the means to the goal (*marga; upaya*) and the goal itself (*nirvana*).[4]

For Garfield, the *upayic* of Nagarjuna's philosophy lies in showing us the nature of what he calls "reification," or the tendency to take that which is conventional for something more than merely conventional.

> Reification is the root of grasping and craving and hence of all suffering. And it is perfectly natural, despite its incoherence. Nagarjuna intends one to break this habit and extirpate the root of suffering...Only with the simultaneous realization of the emptiness, but conventional reality, of phenomena and of the emptiness of emptiness, argues Nagarjuna, can suffering be wholly uprooted.[5]

Nagarjuna's dialectic uproots this tendency to "reify" the world, according to Garfield, by showing not only that all phenomena are "empty"--but by showing us that this very "emptiness" is itself "empty,": that, like everything else, it too is merely a conventional designation. Realizing both, as Garfield says, is the "means" to liberation.

Given that all the above thinkers do see Nagarjuna's dialectic in an *upayic* way, as a definite path to liberation, how can I claim that their approach to Buddhism is, in fact, non-*upayic*? The main reason for this has to do with how they frame the problem. According to their accounts, Nagarjuna already knows in advance what everyone's problem is, and how to solve it. Whether the problem is set up in terms of "falsifying the real," a "referential view of language," "essentialism," or "reification," Nagarjuna is depicted as speaking universally: he not only diagnoses an innate "sickness" in human nature, but cures it by prescribing a set remedy. If we could simply tear away the veil that distorts the Real, if we could just see that linguistic meaning is contextual and pragmatic, or grasp the fact that everything we see and think is nothing but a "conventional designation," then we would all be "cured." However, both the problem and the cure on these accounts are abstract and essentialistic. Asserted not only independently of any rhetorical context and apart from the karmic dispositions of individuals, they are expressed with the assumption that there is one essential problem which everyone shares. Thus, although these thinkers see their works on an *upayic* level, their approach is, ironically enough, the type of "bad medicine" which "skilful means" resists.

It could be said in response to my criticism that these thinkers are simply restating what Nagarjuna already accepts: that is, that all sentient beings naturally cling to things as

having some essential or substantial nature, and that all the suffering in the world arises because of this. After all, Nagarjuna did assert along with the Buddha that "whosoever sees dependent arising, sees the Dharma," and the "whosoever" in this sentence certainly seems to refer to all sentient beings. The problem with this response should be obvious. First, if it is true that Nagarjuna really is speaking to everyone universally, and that his doctrine of "emptiness" is supposed to cure all "ills" no matter time, place, or cultural context, then it is debatable just how *upayic* Nagarjuna's own philosophy really is. Because the doctrine of "skilful means" resists sweeping generalizations regarding human beings and their problems, not only would Nagarjuna be guilty of practicing "bad medicine," but the thinkers I have criticized in this thesis would be at fault for accepting Nagarjuna's ideas in an uncritical way.

Second, and more important, however, is that to read Nagarjuna's statements as referring to all individuals already indicates that a non-*upayic* reading of his ideas is being given. That is, reading his assertions as having universal significance treats his ideas apart from their rhetorical context and as signifying a "truth" independently of their use within a specific discourse. As we saw in Chapter VII, however, Nagarjuna is struggling against a certain way of conceiving liberation, and his dialectic of "emptiness," therefore, rather than referring to anything essential about human nature, is in fact a rhetorical move primarily against the Abhidharma thinkers. It is only when we take his statements out of this context that we are able to attribute universality to his views.

Because the thinkers I criticize in this work treat Nagarjuna's ideas apart from this rhetorical context, it could be argued that they suffer from a prejudice deeply embedded in the Western philosophical and religious tradition. The fact that "emptiness" is less a meditational device and more a "belief" about the world for these thinkers, more about how all things are "conventional" by nature, lacking in "essence," or dependently arisen than a "skilful means" used within a Buddhist practice reveals a deep seated bias. That we are

often told that "emptiness" cures "us" (even those of us who don't practice Buddhism) of "our" deepest philosophical ills shows that a decontextualizing process has begun, a process that treats basic pedagogical strategies in terms of "theories," "ideas," and "propositions," and apart from their cultural and rhetorical context. That we are further advised that without adopting a certain epistemological framework, a "belief" about the how the mind works, or how causality is linguistically structured, or how all things are conventionally posited, it is impossible to attain liberation, we have left a strictly Buddhist framework--and entered one that seems distinctly Platonic and Christian.

Though it could be argued that these thinkers are working within a Platonic and Christian tradition, we should remember that Nagarjuna's thought is directed primarily against the Abhidharma tradition which is within Indian Buddhism. The Abhidharma schools, it should be recalled, treated Buddhist doctrine in a "theoretical" way, not only by privileging knowledge above practice, but by saying that the Dharma was more than a "path," more than a "skilful means" that can be used to ferry sentient beings across the turbulent waters of *samsara*. According to many Abhidharma thinkers, such as Vasubandhu, Buddhist doctrine not only articulates "ultimate truth," but leads directly to the attainment of this "truth"--such that one must take *this* particular "raft" in order to be liberated. Although far from the Platonic and Christian traditions, the Abhidharma shares with them an emphasis on epistemology, theory, and "truth." Nagarjuna's critique is in line with the Mahayana emphasis on *upaya*, and amounts to deconstructing the emphasis on knowledge by showing the absurdity in the Abhidharma views of causation, space, time, motion, and so forth; thus revealing the weaknesses in their claim that one needs knowledge of the inner workings of the mind or the universe in order to attain liberation.

After having attacked so many others for turning Buddhism into "bad medicine," however, and after devoted an entire thesis to explaining that Buddhism is rooted in practice, and that it is impossible to make sense of "skilful means" apart from the concrete

needs and karmic dispositions of an audience, the position of my thesis in relation to everything I criticize is obviously problematic. Is my thesis an *upaya*? Is it grounded in the lives of others, a practical guide or a "raft" toward liberation? If it is true, as I have repeated throughout this thesis, that "skilful means" is a practical guide, and that by thinking of it in terms of "theory" we lose sight of what Buddhism is really about, then have I not led my readers down that very same path by returning, chapter after chapter, to a "theoretical" account of *upaya*?

Such questions go directly to the heart of my thesis, exposing its weakest point. This thesis is not an *upaya*, it is not a "raft" or a path toward liberation. It is not grounded in the Buddhist life of practice, and nor is it a meditational tool. Therefore, it too is guilty of speaking about Buddhism apart from practice, and suffers from the problem of explaining its central ideas (e.g., *upaya*) apart from how they function in the lives of Buddhist practitioners. In effect, this thesis is afflicted with that exact "illness" which the Buddha, Vimalakirti, and Nagarjuna all sought to cure.

On the other hand, what distinguishes my thesis from those I criticize is the awareness that it is *not* a path to liberation. I have basically said that there are many paths to this goal, and that what many see as the "central" philosophy in Buddhism (i.e., "emptiness," "non-self," "dependent arising," etc.) is but one path, one *upaya*, among many. But I have not determined in advance what any path is, or how one should view the world in order to attain liberation. This is because I have tried to remain faithful to the doctrine of *upaya* which undercuts our ability to say in advance, and previous to knowing who one is addressing or what one's "illness" is, how liberation should be sought out. This, I think, is where my thesis differs most from those I have criticized. For them, "emptiness" is a panacea, a medicine that will cure everyone regardless of the disease, and their texts are generally devoted to telling us what our problem is, and how to cure it. And

all of this, oddly enough, without even knowing who we are. My thesis has simply tried to show why this approach "tends not to edification."

NOTES

[1] Williams (1989), p. 4.

[2] Murti, (1955), p. 271.

[3] Streng, (1967), p. 149.

[4] Huntington, (1989), p. 40.

[5] Garfield, (1995), p. 314.

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